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by Gordon D. Shirreffs

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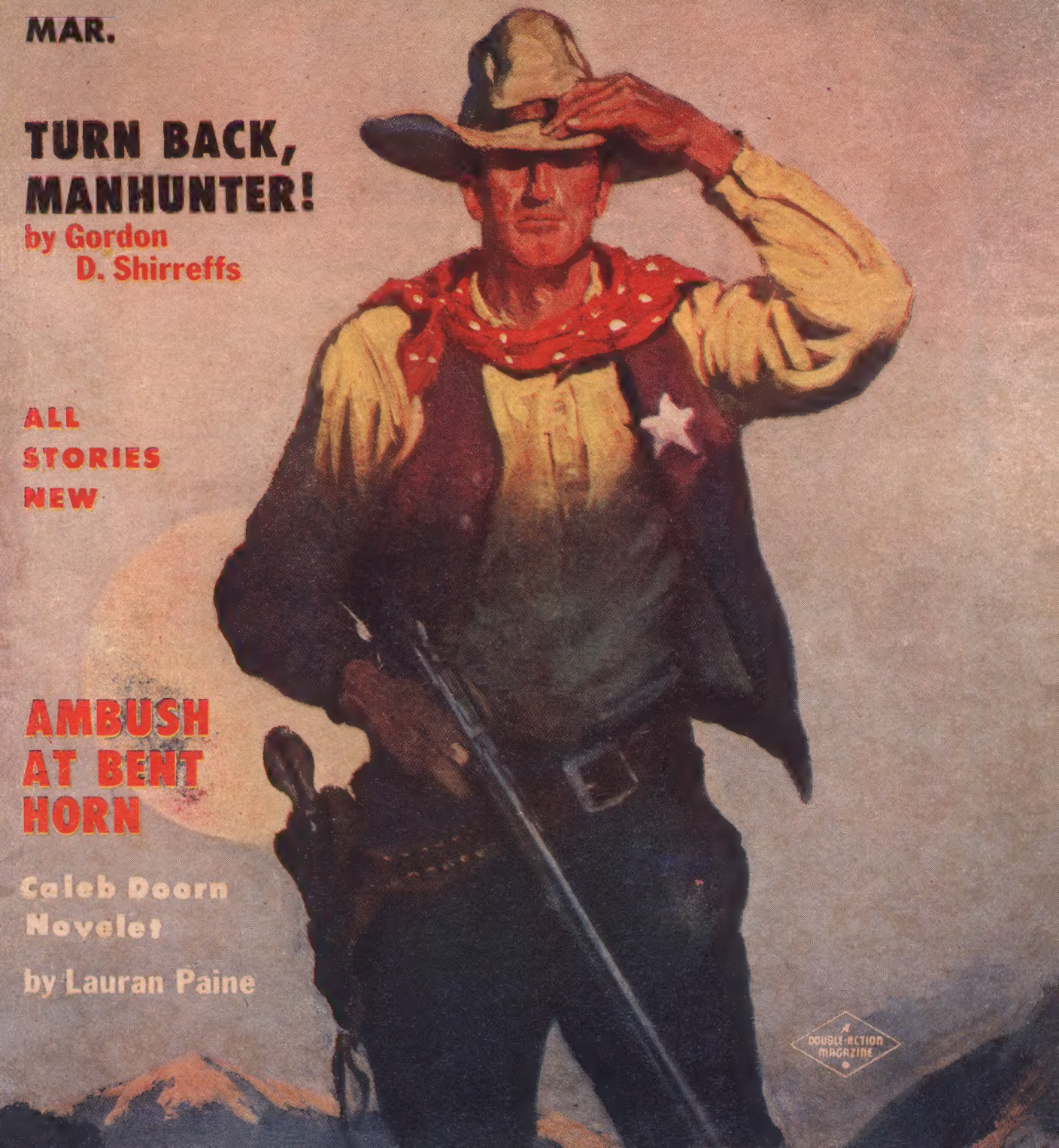

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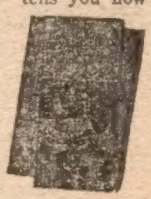

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TURN BACK, MANHUNTER!

★ FEATURED NOVEL of
THE LAWMAN'S CODE

by Gordon D. Shirreffs

THE GROUND beneath the dun sank so suddenly that Walt Dyer went over the edge in a rushing cascade of rock before he knew what had happened. He kicked free from his stirrups and gripped a projecting rock. The dun went down the almost-vertical slope; dust rose in a thick cloud.

Walt scrabbled for a foothold as the rock let go. He plunged down twenty feet, slashing his hands and face against a clump of cactus. His outthrust hands caught at the thick stem of a mesquite and he hung there, sweating the icy sweat of fear. He heard the last of the thrashing dun's descent as it hit with a smash far below, followed by the dull roar of cascading rock.

Dyer forced his boot toes into a crevice, for his arms were beginning to tire. He did not dare look down. Above him, the cliff face was almost sheer,

composed of rotten rock which the slightest movement would cause to slide, carrying him with it.

Walt cursed his decision to take that dangerous, little-known trail, but somewhere ahead of him was Carl Lowell, the man he had hunted for over half of Arizona. He raised his head as hooves thudded on the trail above him. He yelled wildly.

A head poked over the trail edge. A young face studied Walt. "What in hell's name are you doing down there?" the man asked.

Walt swore. "Get me up, dammit!"

The head disappeared; in a moment something struck Walt's hat, and a riata fell about his shoulders. He let go of the mesquite bush with left hand and gripped the riata; then he shifted his right hand to it and hung on for dear life.

"All set?" the man called down.

Walt nodded. Slowly, he was pulled up, sweating blood in fear that the newcomer's horse would cave in the trail as Dyer's own mount had done. Suddenly his head was above the edge

of the cliff; a pair of strong hands caught him under the armpits and heaved him onto the hot rock of the trail.

The man whistled sharply at his horse and then sat back against the cliff face as Walt rolled over and sat up. "Close one, that," the man said.

Walt picked cactus thorns out of his hands. "Gracias," he said. He looked up at his rescuer. A pair of gay gray eyes studied him; the man was hardly more than a boy. Two ivory-butted Colts were tied down about his leather chaps. He reached into his shirt pocket and drew out the makings, handing them to Walt. Walt made a smoke and lit up, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. He looked out over the immense hazy valley below them, shadowed by swiftly moving clouds. Life felt damned good. He looked at the young man. "I'm Walt Dyer," he said.

"Sid Lowell."

Walt eyed him through the wreathing cigaret smoke. Then he realized why the young man looked familiar. He was a younger edition of Carl Lowell. "I'll bet if you hadn't come along, I would have waited a long time," he said quietly. He puffed at his cigaret. "Maybe I wouldn't have long to wait at that; I would have been down there beside my cayuse."

"Not many men take this trail. How is it you happened to be on it? You aren't from around here. Surprised anyone but a local man would have even known of it."

Dyer picked at a stubborn thorn in his hand. "I saw dust up here when I was down in the canyon. Figured it was a short cut to Stirling." He *had* seen dust; Carl Lowell's dust.

"It is," said Sid; "but it isn't safe for those who don't know it."

"Yeah. So I found out," said Walt dryly.

They both laughed. Sid leaned over the edge and looked down at the dun. "No chance of getting down there to get your things," he said. "Lose much?"

"A damned good horse, a good saddle, my Winchester and some clothes. I'm satisfied except for the horse; I could be down there, too."

The young man stood up and brushed his clothes. "You should have led the horse along here. Ain't safe to ride until you get on the downgrade. We'll hoof it that far, and then I can ride you double into Stirling."

"Fair enough. I'll take care of your thirst when we get there."

Sid Lowell coiled his riata. "You don't know what you're saying; I got a helluva thirst."

"I'll match it, after this scare."

SID LED the claybank along the trail and Walt slogged on behind, feeling sweat sting the many cuts on his body. He had heard that Carl Lowell had a brother, but as far as he knew, Sid was in the clear with the law. Walt reached inside his coat and felt his commission in the Arizona Rangers, which was sewn into his shirt.

There was a warrant for Carl's arrest inside his right boot. Carl had held up the bank in Cienga, fatally wounding a teller, and getting away with over four thousand dollars. A doctor had stepped out of his office with a Spencer repeater and had wounded the bandit's companion, who later confessed that the masked man with him had been Carl Lowell. A posse had chased Carl as far as the Benson area and almost had him trapped, when a hidden marksman with a heavy caliber rifle had dropped two of their horses and driven them off. When the posse moved in, they had found Carl's blown horse and the tracks of other horses heading south.

Carl had been seen later in Willcox, and a wire had come to Walt Dyer in Tucson ordering him to take up the trail. Since then, Walt had been in

Globe, Fort Thomas, and even as far as Lordsburg on wild goose chases. His first real tip had come in Bisbee; then he had been hot on the trail, following Carl by a few miles until he had made the mistake of taking the short cut to Stirling.

When they reached the down trail, Sid swung up on the claybank and Walt got up behind him. The claybank was travel-stained but seemed fresh enough. There were pommel and cantle packs on him. It looked as though Sid Lowell had been on the trail for some time.

"You work near Stirling?" asked Walt.

"Near there. Spend a lot of time in town."

"Been away?"

"Yeah. Got the itchy foot for a little vacation. I've been down in Sonora looking around."

"Find anything?"

Sid laughed. "Nothing but Rurales. They sure watch that border."

"Yeh," said Walt dryly, "they sure do; I never go down there myself."

"No appreciation for a good American boy."

"No." The claybank reached the bottom of the trail and headed out across the lower slopes of the mountains. Smoke stained the western sky. "Stirling," said Sid, pointing toward the smoke. "What's your line? You don't look like a miner."

"I've had half a dozen lines," said Walt. "The usual—cowpoke, prospector, liveryman, teamster and outright tramp. Any work in Stirling?"

"Some. You can get a job on half a dozen ranches needing men."

"I'd like to try the town for a spell."

"Maybe my brother might help you out."

"Your brother?"

"Yeah; Carl Lowell. He's got his hand in quite a few things."

He sure has, thought Walt, *including other people's money.*

- 2 -

STIRLING squatted on the lower slopes of some salmon-colored hills. Above the shabby town were the mines. Smoke drifted off from their tall chimneys, and the mine tailings reached down toward the outskirts of the town, as though to engulf it.

Sid Lowell kneed the claybank toward a hitching rack; Walt Dyer slid down. They were in front of a sagging saloon called *The Pride.* Sid grinned. "You said you'd take care of my thirst."

Walt nodded as he slapped the dust from his clothing with his hat and stepped into the saloon. He blinked in the semi-darkness.

Sid brushed past him and slapped a hand down on the bar. "Rye, Bert," he said. "Where's Carl?"

The barkeep jerked his head toward the rear of the saloon. "In the office; he's been expecting you. Any trouble?"

"No."

As they drank, Walt eyed the men in the saloon; Stirling was a rough town, with a bad reputation. It was at the tail-end of a silver boom but was going strong. There wasn't much law here.

Sid raised his glass and downed his drink. "Come on back," he said. "Carl might put you in the way of a job. Carl runs things his own way around here."

Sid turned away from the bar waving his hand in greeting to most of the men. He led the way to a hall in the rear, and opened a door.

Walt looked into an office where a tall man sat behind a desk, with booted feet atop it.

Carl Lowell looked up at Sid. "Where the hell have you been?"

Sid jerked a thumb at Walt. "This is

Walt Dyer. His hoss caved in the old trail up near Lone Peak. I came along in time to pull him up."

"So?" Carl's hard eyes studied Walt.

"Saved my life," said Walt.

Carl lit a cigar. "Set," he said. His clothing was still dusty from the trail and he had need of a shave. "What were you doing up on the old trail, Dyer?"

"I saw the trail and figured it would save me time; it nearly cost me my life. Lost my cayuse and gear."

Carl leaned back and puffed at his cigar. Dyer could almost feel his dislike. Carl Lowell was a lobo, suspicious of everyone. He had been on the suspect list of the Arizona Rangers for a long time, but the robbing at Cienaga had been the first clear case against him. There was none of Sid's friendliness about Carl. Carl was easily ten years older than Sid, who couldn't have been more than twenty. Give the kid a few more years under Carl's tutelage, and he would be just as dangerous—perhaps more so, because Carl often used trickery instead of his guns. It was said that Carl had few friends because of his ways.

"Were you coming to Stirling?" asked Carl.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Walt smiled. "For work."

"Where were you before that?"

"In El Paso," lied Walt.

Carl rubbed his jaw. He looked at Sid. "Get out of here, Dyer," he said abruptly; "I want to talk to Sid."

Walt flushed. He got to his feet and left the room, shutting the door behind him. There was a room beside the office that was piled with empty cases of bottles. Walt stepped into and stood behind some of the cases, his ear close to the thin wall.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Sid?" asked Carl, "Bringing *him* in here?"

"You want me to leave him hanging on the side of a cliff?"

"You didn't have to bring him here."

"For gawd's sake, Carl, go easy; you're like a damned bear with a sore nose."

"That's why I'm still alive. What did you find out?"

"I found a hell of a nice place near the Rio Yaqui. The price is right." After a moment's pause, Sid asked, "When do we pull out?"

"We need more money."

"Where do you aim to get it?"

"Right here in town, Sid; the mines pay off next week."

"Are you loco, Carl?"

"What the hell difference does it make? I'll have *The Pride* sold by then with the dinero in my jeans. We can hit the mine office and pull out for the border."

"What about Ellen?"

"She'll have to go along."

"I'm not so sure she'll want to do that, Carl. She's damned law-abiding, and you know it."

"She'll do as she's told!"

FEET SCRAPED against the floor and Walt Dyer left the storeroom and walked into the saloon. He was standing at the end of the bar when Sid and Carl came out.

"I'll be getting on," said Walt. "I've got to get a place to sleep and then look for a job."

Sid waved a hand. "My sister Ellen will put you up in her boarding house down the street." He looked at Carl. "Any jobs open around here, Carl?"

Carl walked away from them. "Joe Tarby, over at the livery stable, needs a man."

Sid grinned. "Don't mind Carl, Walt; he's a little on the sour side these days."

"How so?"

Sid downed his drink. "Business ain't no good. See you later." Then, he left the saloon.

Walt followed him and crossed the street to the livery stable. A short, bow-legged man came to the front of the stable. "Can I help you?" he asked.

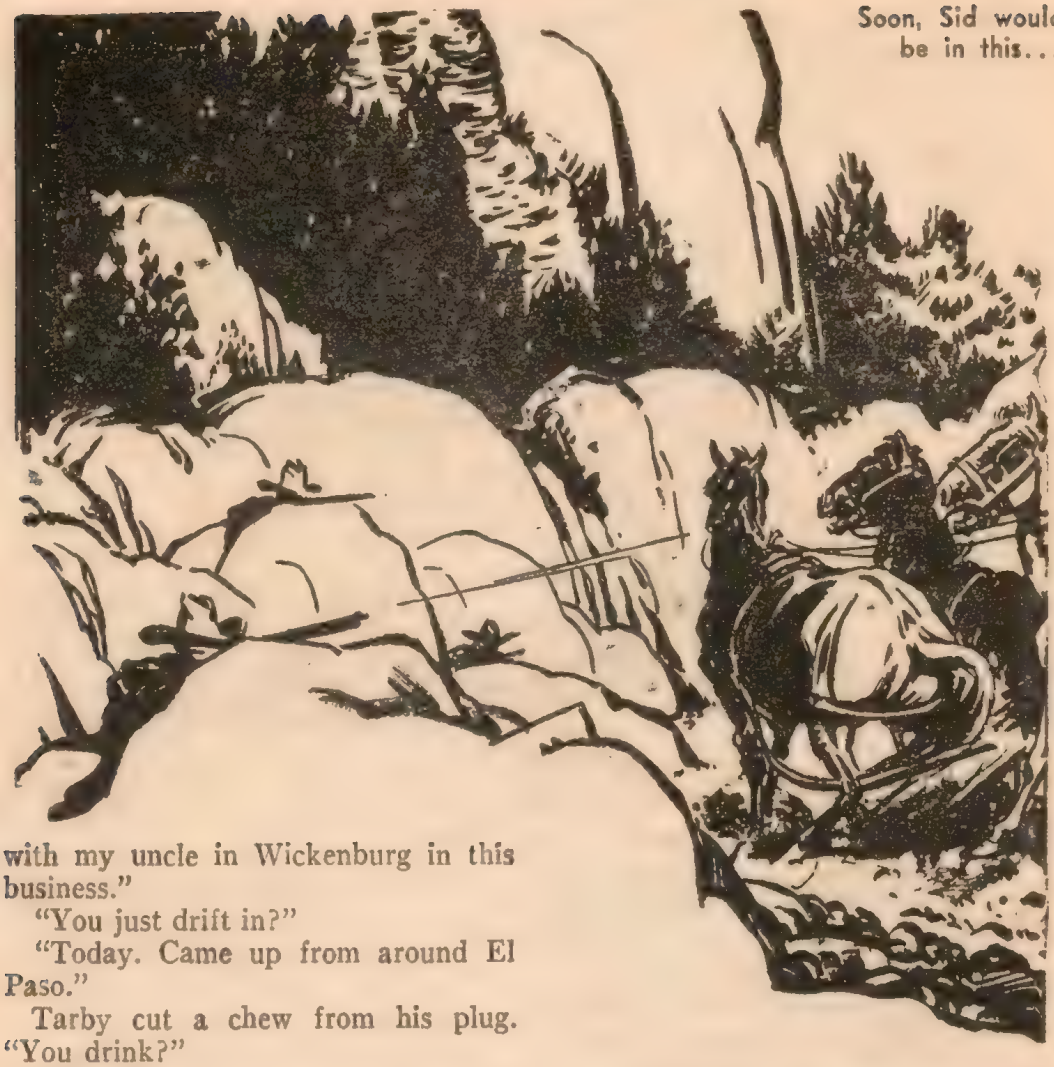
"Are you Joe Tarby?"

"I am."

"I hear you need a man."

Joe looked Walt Dyer up and down. "I need a *good* man."

"I know the business, Joe; worked



Soon, Sid would be in this...

with my uncle in Wickenburg in this business."

"You just drift in?"

"Today. Came up from around El Paso."

Tarby cut a chew from his plug. "You drink?"

"Yes. But not enough to interfere with my work."

"Hmmm... Who sent you over?"

"Carl Lowell."

Tarby stowed the chew in his wide mouth. "Sorry; try somewheres else."

Walt smiled. "I met Sid Lowell on the trail. My cayuse fell and was killed. If it hadn't been for Sid, I would have been killed, too. Sid brought me in and asked Carl if there was any work; he said to see you. I'm no friend of his, if that's why you won't hire me."

Tarby waved Walt into his little office. He sat down and cocked his feet up on a battered desk. "Well, maybe I *was* a little hasty. You don't look like a Lowell man."

"What *is* a Lowell man?"

Tarby shifted his chew. "As close to an outlaw as a man can get without being run in."

"Then the job is mine, Joe. I'm *not* a Lowell man."

Joe grinned. "Damned sure of yourself, aren't you? You been on the bum? You don't look like it."

Walt rolled a cigaret and lit it. He eyed Joe through the tobacco smoke. "Seems to me I've heard your name somewhere before; you used to be a lawman, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Deputy U. S. Marshal Tarby, up around Holbrook way. Caught a slug in the leg from one of the old Hashknife outfit afore it was broke up. I sure miss the job. Not much money; a lot of risk. But a man was a *man* in

that outfit. Now I clean out horse manure and try to be satisfied."

"Is the job mine?" Walt asked.

"Keno. You can start in the morning."

"Thanks."

Joe waved a hand. "As I said: I need a good man." He reached into the desk and brought out a bottle and two glasses. "Baconora mezcal," he said; "the best. Smuggled stuff. Maybe I ought to report it, but dammit, I like the taste and the price. One thing riles me about it though; it puts too much dinero in Carl Lowell's pocket."

"Why?"

"He has it smuggled in. Cleans up. No one dares refuse to buy it at his price around here. I take good care of his hoss, so he gives me a fair price."

Dyer tasted it. It was good. "I take it you don't care for Carl Lowell."

Tarby glanced at the door. "Don't say that; he's pretty rough on those he thinks don't like him."

"Cock of the walk, eh?"

"Something like that; all horns and rattles when he's crossed."

"Sid seems to be a friendly hombre."

"He is. Going downhill fast in Carl's company though. Makes Ellen Lowell sore as hell, but she can't do much with either one of them."

Dyer finished his drink. "I'd better get a room."

"Ellen Lowell has a nice place; don't stand for no hanky-panky. You can bunk down here in the back room if you like."

Walt stood up. "Thanks just the same. I like horses, but I don't care much about sleeping around them; inside that is."

"Suit yourself."

Dyer walked up the street until he reached the telegraph office. He went in and called over the telegrapher. "I want to send a wire to Globe." The telegrapher got a pad and Walt dic-

tated; *"Dear Mac: Got a job now. Will send on the money soon. You can address me at Joe Tarby's Livery Stable, Stirling. How is mother?"*

As he left the office, he thought back on how he and MacDonald Robinson had worked out a code when they were operating undercover. Mentioning a man's name in connection with the question, *How is mother?,* was code asking the recipient to check on the man mentioned. If Joe was still on the side of law and order, he would be a big help.

- 3 -

ELLEN LOWELL'S boarding house was set back from the street. It was neat and clean. Dyer waited in the parlor as the colored girl who let him in went to get Ellen Lowell.

She came into the parlor with a swish of skirts and Walt stood up quickly. She was like her two brothers in that she had the same gray eyes. Yet, there was a difference in her; she had the look of downright respectability.

"I'm Walter Dyer, ma'am. Just got into town and went to work for Joe Tarby. I'd like a room."

She eyed him. "I have one room left; where are you from, sir?"

"Originally from Arizona. I've been working around El Paso, but got homesick for Arizona."

"Who sent you here?"

"Your brother Sid."

She frowned. "Is he back in town?"

"Yes, ma'am; gave me a lift on the road when my horse was killed in a fall."

"Did you know him before?"

"No."

"I see. Well, you look all right. We keep good hours here, Mr. Dyer, and I allow no credit."

Walt smiled. "Fair enough."

She turned. "I'll show you to your room." She led the way up the stairs to a back room. It was small but neat and clean. She opened the window and looked out over the town. "Have you ever been in Stirling before?"

"No."

"It can be a nice town. I'm afraid it isn't, right now."

She was pretty, Walt decided. Young, too; too young to be running a boarding house. "Mining towns are usually rough," he said.

She turned. "It isn't the miners, Mister Dyer. I have some of them staying here; they are good men. It's the gamblers, saloon keepers and outlaws who give Stirling a bad name."

He took a long shot. "I thought your brother Carl owned *The Pride?"*

She flushed "He does, I'm ashamed to say." She left the room.

Walt sat down on the bed and looked out of the window. So far things had worked out right. Carl Lowell had been named as the man who had robbed the bank in Cienaga. Dyer could arrest him right now, but he wanted to get his hands on the man who had helped Carl escape.

He suspected Sid. Then, too, there was the planned robbery of the mine payroll. There might be others in on it. Walt wanted them all; he had been taught that way in the Rangers. Stirling was a thorn in the side of law and order in Arizona and Captain Mossman had told him to break up Carl Lowell's whole bunch if he could. He must play a waiting game in a town that was full of men who would like nothing better than to pump lead into a ranger and watch him die.

WALT LEFT the room after dark and made the run of the town, getting the setup; seven saloons and three dance halls on Silver Street alone. They were all wide open.

Dyer went into *The Pride* and ordered rye. The place was full.

Sid Lowell came in with a trail-dusty man. He nodded at Walt as he passed. The man with him looked worried as they went into the back part of the saloon.

Walt drank slowly. Suddenly a door burst open in the rear. The man who had come in with Sid was backing toward the front of the saloon.

Carl Lowell appeared, his face set and white. "Damn you, Josh! I don't take lip like that from any man!"

The soft slap of cards and the clinking of glass suddenly stopped. A roulette wheel whirred softly to a halt. Men stepped back from the line of possible fire.

Josh hurriedly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I ain't taking no lip from you either, Lowell," he said. He stopped in front of Dyer.

Sid Lowell was just behind Carl. "Take it easy, Carl," Sid said; "I'll take care of Josh."

Carl spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "'Bout time you learned to do things *my* way. Sid."

Walt could see the sweat work out on Josh's dusty face. "Don't you draw on me, Carl," he said.

The saloon customers, as well as Walt, began to crowd back against the walls. Carl folded his arms. "Josh," he said, "you're nothing but a stupid idiot; give you a simple job to do and you mess it up."

Josh pulled at his collar. "I couldn't help it, Carl," he said. He dropped his hand by his side.

"Don't you go for that hog-leg!" said Carl. He slapped his right hand down, drew his Colt and fired. The slug raised the dust from Josh's vest. He grunted and fell against Walt Dyer. Carl came forward with a lopsided grin on his lean face. "Draw, Josh!" he said. "Go ahead! Draw!"

Walt stepped suddenly in front of the stricken man as Josh sagged toward the floor. Blood from his shirt soaked into the ranger's shirt.

Carl ran forward and gripped Dyer by the arm. "Get out of the way!" he said.

Walt threw him off. "The man is hit bad," he said.

Carl swung up his Colt as though to buffalo Walt, who dropped the dying Josh and blocked the swing of the tall man's arm with his left forearm. He drove in a short, jolting right, smashing Carl back against Sid.

Carl cursed. He raised the Colt, but Sid gripped his wrist and forced the gun hand up. "Dammit, Carl!" he said tensely, "you've already killed one man; don't kill another one!" He wrestled his older brother back against the bar.

Carl looked over Sid's shoulder. "I won't forget this, Dyer," he said.

Walt knelt beside the man on the floor, but Josh stared sightlessly up at him. Walt looked up at Carl. "He's dead; someone better get the marshal."

A man laughed. Another rubbed his jaw. "Self defense," he said with a grin. "Josh was going to draw on Carl. Carl beat him to the draw. Let's get on with the game, boys."

Walt stood up and watched the men return to their games and their drinking. Walt turned to the bartender. "Isn't someone going to call the marshal?"

The bartender glanced at Carl Lowell. "There *isn't* any marshal in Stirling."

Sid Lowell came forward. "Get out of here, Dyer," he said in a low voice. "What the hell did you have to interfere for?"

Walt eyed the young man. "That was damned cold-blooded, wasn't it?"

"Josh riled Carl."

"So he killed him; Josh didn't want to draw, Sid."

Sid's eyes hardened. "Don't talk like a damned lawyer. If you aim to stay in Stirling, you go along with Carl; might as well learn that now."

WALT TURNED on a heel and left *The Pride*. He rolled a cigaret. He

felt for matches and heard a scraping noise behind him in the darkness.

He whirled and had his Colt halfway free of its holster when he recognized Joe Tarby in the yellow light of a lucifer. The little man held the light to Walt's cigaret. "Calm down, Dyer," he said. Walt dropped his Colt into its holster. Tarby gripped him by the arm. "Let's walk," he said; "I've got a bottle in the office."

In the office, Tarby filled the glasses and looked at Walt's bloodstained shirt. "You're lucky that isn't your blood, Dyer."

Walt sat down. "Talk about coldbloodedness— That man Josh was murdered, Joe."

"Yeah. Although I can't say I'm sorry. Josh was no missionary; he had a few notches himself, Walt."

"I wonder what riled Carl."

Tarby lit a cigar. "Josh handled the deliveries of mezcal up from the border. I guess something went wrong." He tilted his chair back against the wall. "Carl Lowell has been ornery ever since he got back from his last trip."

"Why?"

"No one knows. Carl usually is a bit on the touchy side. I saw him buffalo a whiskey drummer once because the man coughed too much. Carl takes off now and then and comes back, but he never opens his mouth. He and Sid go in and out of here like a couple of traveling salesmen. Carl is money crazy; trying to pile it up like a pack rat. He's got Sid hitched up, too. Carl doesn't care how much his boys fight or kill; but he raises one hell of a stink, like you saw tonight, if they mess up a deal about money."

Walt Dyer emptied his glass and refilled it. He looked out of the livery office window, across the street to *The Pride*, where two men were carrying out the remains of Josh. "How is it they have no marshal here?" he asked.

"Stirling never bothered with one. Each man is his own law here, backed up by his sixgun. There's money in this town, Walt."

"And no law-abiders."

"You're wrong there. There are plenty of them, willing to forget the lawlessness to make money."

"Like Ellen Lowell."

Tarby frowned. He jabbed out a finger at Walt. "Don't you say *that* around here, Dyer! Ellen Lowell is a fine young woman trying to live down two bronco brothers. She's all right."

"Then why doesn't she leave Stirling?"

Tarby refilled his glass. "Ellen has hopes of saving Sid from Carl. Believe me, that's the only reason."

Walt rubbed his jaw. "Sid is as bad as Carl, isn't he?"

"No; Sid is all right. His father was killed in the explosion at the Lodestar mine eight years ago; his mother died soon after. Ellen was just a kid herself then, who tried to keep the family together. Carl fought his way up from a patched pants kid to the biggest man in Stirling. He's whang-leather tough. He was Sid's hero. Gradually Sid began to listen to Carl rather than Ellen; he'll end up the same way."

"What do you mean?"

Tarby jerked a thumb at the wall behind him. "Boothill."

Later, Walt walked back to the boarding house, where he found Ellen Lowell reading in the parlor. She looked up as Walt passed through the hall. "Mister Dyer!" Walt came into the parlor. She put down her book. "Was there a shooting in town?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"A man was shot down in *The Pride.*"

She stood up. "Is he dead?"

"Yes." Walt's coat fell open. She looked at the bloodstain on it. Her face paled and she put a hand to her throat. "Have you been hurt?"

Walt looked down at the stain. "No, I was beside the man who was killed; I caught him as he fell."

"Who did it?"

Walt looked away.

She came close and touched his arm. "Was it one of my brothers?"

"Yes."

"Was it Sid?"

He shook his head. She stepped back and the color returned to her face. "Thank God."

Walt studied her. "Does it matter?"

She looked away. "There is no hope for Carl, Mr. Dyer; he that lives by the sword, you know. Carl and I do not speak. I've tried to get Sid to leave Stirling with me, but Carl has such an influence on him." She smiled. "But that doesn't concern you. I'll take that shirt and have it washed for you."

He smiled. "I lost my other clothing, Miss Lowell. I'll wear this tomorrow and get another shirt. It isn't worth bothering with."

"Good night."

Walt went up the stairs and into his room. He sat for a long time smoking and looking out over the town. It was still booming with night life. He suddenly realized he was very tired.

- 4 -

WALT GOT up late and dressed hurriedly. He was long overdue at the livery stable. He looked for his shirt. It was gone from the back of the chair where he had hung it. Cold sweat broke out on him; his commission was sewn into the lining.

He opened the door quickly as he heard someone in the hall. The colored girl was standing out there with his shirt, neatly pressed and folded. "Mizz Lowell tole me to wash your shirt, sir," she said.

She handed it to Walt. He felt it. It *had* been washed. The commission was still in the shirt, for he could feel its folds; but it was still dry from the feel of it.

"There was some paper in the lining," the maid said.

Walt nodded. He eyed her. "Can you read?"

She grinned. "No, sir, wisht I could. Is the shirt all right?"

He nodded. Walt went back into the room and closed the door. He opened the shirt. The commission did not look as if it had been disturbed, yet it was dry. It must have been taken from the shirt before it was washed. Dyer cursed. Could the maid have taken it out? If she had, and Ellen Lowell hadn't seen it, he was still in the clear. What if Ellen *had* taken it out before it was washed? In all certainty, she would have read it. Would she warn her brothers, whom she knew to be outlaws?

Walt put the shirt on and swung his gunbelt about his slim waist with practiced ease, buckling and settling it. He took out his short-barreled Colt and examined it. He might have to use it before he had intended to. He put on his hat and shrugged into his black coat. As an after thought, he touched the double-barreled derringer in the side pocket. He had a feeling he was walking about in a nest of diamond backs.

Joe Tarby was in the stable when Walt showed up. "I'm sorry, Joe." said Walt.

Joe waved a hand. "I knew you were tired," he said. "Take over for a spell while I get some breakfast, will you? You can go later."

Walt hung up his coat and set to work. It was warm in the stable, so he took off his gunbelt and hung it near the door. He was cleaning out a stall when he heard spurs jingle behind him. He turned to see Carl Lowell standing at the front of the stable.

There was another man with him. A cigaret was pasted to his lower lip. His Mexican sombrero was heavy with coin silver ornamentation. Two stag-han-

dled Colts were hung at his sides for a cross-arm draw. His thin face looked as though it was carved from wood. Carl spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "It's the hombre who slugged me, Sonora."

"Yeah." Sonora's voice was as devoid of emotion as his face.

Dyer eyed them. "Can I help you?"

"He wants to *help* us," said Carl.

"Yeah."

Walt flushed. "I've got work to do," he said quietly.

"Get my black," said Carl.

Walt went to the back of the stable and got Carl Lowell's sleek black. It was a fine horse; too fine for the likes of Carl Lowell. Walt saddled it and led it up to the tall man.

Carl walked around the black. "Looks all right," he said. He bent and looked at a hoof. "Looks like a loose shoe," he said.

Walt bent down to look at it as Carl stood up. Suddenly, a boot smashed into Walt's rump, driving him flat on his face. The black moved nervously away.

Sonora laughed flatly. "He fell down, Carl."

Walt stood up, he swung at Sonora but was hit on the side of the jaw by Carl. He hit a post and turned in time to get kicked in the gut. He doubled over and a Colt smashed alongside his head, driving him to the floor again. Walt rolled over, came up like an uncoiling spring, and caught Carl Lowell full under the chin with a whistling uppercut. Carl's head snapped back and he staggered back against the wall, hitting it with a thud, then slid down to the floor.

Walt whirled, jumped to one side and booted Sonora in the side. Sonora grunted and bent; Walt caught him with a driving left and followed with a right cross that sent the tall man down. Something hit him alongside the jaw. It was Carl's Colt. Walt went down on his knees and was booted in the side. As he tried to get up, he looked full into Sonora's gun muzzle.

"Get up, you tinhorn," said Sonora.

Carl slid his Colt into its holster and swung at Walt, smashing him down again. Sonora kicked him forward to meet a left jab that straightened him out. A right hook sent Walt down again. He tried to get up as Carl began to work him over with his boots. He felt a rib crack. Suddenly a man came into the stable. "That's enough," said Joe Tarby, sixgun in hand.

"Damn you, Tarby," grated Sonora, "keep out of it!"

Carl stepped back. "Get out of here while we finish this," he said, then started for Walt again.

Tarby's Colt flashed and the slug rapped into a post. The black whinnied. Tarby grinned through the wreathing smoke. "Maybe you didn't understand me," he said softly. "I said, *'That's enough.'* "

LOWELL picked up his hat. Sonora slid his Colt into its sheath. Lowell took the reins of his black. "I'll settle with you, Joe," he said thinly; "you're queered with me."

"So? I'm worried." Tarby stepped aside to watch them leave the stable. Walt sat up and leaned back against a post. Blood trickled from his mouth, his side ached like the devil and his jaw was bruised and swollen. He looked at his split knuckles. Tarby knelt beside him and tilted Walt's head to one side. "He buffalo you?"

Walt nodded. "I got in a few licks of my own," he said.

Tarby whistled softly. "You sure did; what got into you?"

"Nothing. I got booted. No man can get away with that, Joe. I'm sorry if I've caused you any trouble with Lowell."

Tarby helped Walt to his feet. "Come and have a drink; don't worry about me. I've learned something I like."

"So?"

"I ain't the only man in town that

ain't afraid of Carl Lowell and his sidewinders."

"Keep talking."

"Maybe you and me can work together to clean up Stirling."

"Me? I'm just a saddletramp."

Tarby got out the bottle and eyed Walt. "I ain't so sure about that."

There was a cold feeling in Walt despite the heat of the recent battle in his system. "How so?"

"The way you stood off those two hardcases ain't the way of any bum. You dress and act too well, Dyer. Just who are you, anyway?"

"Thanks for helping me out, Tarby." Walt stood up. "I'll be leaving now."

"Don't get huffy. I'm sorry I got nosey. Set! This bottle is still loaded."

Walt sat down. Tarby would be a good ally if the time for closing in on the Lowells came along. "I'd better get to a doc," he said, "and have this rib checked."

"Go ahead."

"You don't owe me anything for today, Joe."

Joe Tarby grinned. "I'll double your wages for today; it was worth it to see Carl Lowell get knocked on his rump."

Walt left the stable after putting on his coat and gunbelt. Men eyed him as he walked along the shady side of the street to the doctor's office. He wondered how many of them would stand up against the Lowells when the time came.

After the doctor bandaged his rib and treated his cuts, he stopped off in the telegraph office. There was a wire there from MacDonald Robinson.

Walt read:

Happy to hear from you, Walt. Don't worry about the money. Mother is in the best of health.

Walt left the office and went back to the stable. Tarby was aces with the Arizona Rangers. Walt had one man he could rely on.

Sid Lowell was leaning against a hitching post when Walt headed for the livery stable. Walt stopped. Sid eyed him through wreathing tobacco smoke. Men stopped to watch them. Sid rubbed his jaw. "You sure been swinging a wide loop around here, Walt," he said.

"I'm in no mood for more trouble, Sid."

Sid raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I ain't planning to raise any trouble; not with *you*. Anyone who stands up against Carl and Sonora Gaines is plenty hardcase. I had a feeling Carl would go after you."

Walt touched his swollen jaw. "He did."

Sid grinned. "Carl ain't exactly the forgiving type. One thing, Dyer; I'd get out of town if I was you."

"Why?"

Sid took his cigaret from his mouth and inspected it. "I was talking to Ellen, my sister; she likes you, Walt."

"So?"

Sid looked up. His eyes were veiled. "Don't push Carl too far, Walt."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, he ain't the forgiving type. Besides, Ellen is worried about you. See you later, amigo."

Walt watched the young man walk toward *The Pride. How much did he know?* Walt liked him and he was sure Sid returned the feeling; but Sid's loyalty to his brother was obviously above question. Had Ellen seen the commission in Dyer's shirt? Had she warned Sid? It would be like her. Yet she wouldn't endanger Walt's life; she was for law and order. Was her loyalty to Sid above her respect for law and order?

Walt cursed to himself as he stopped in to buy a couple of shirts. The man behind the counter eyed Walt. "You sure are living on borrowed time, friend."

"How so?"

"Bucking the Lowells isn't healthy in Stirling."

"So it seems," said Walt dryly.

The man looked out of the window

and then went to the door. "You did a good job," he said over his shoulder, "It's all over town by now. You aim to keep working for Joe?"

"Yes."

The man came back to the counter. "This town needs a marshal. We merchants haven't dared to hire one for fear of Carl Lowell. You interested?"

"No, thanks; I'd like to live long enough to collect enough money to get out of town."

"Yeh, I see what you mean. Well, if you change your mind, you come and see me. The name is Les Valmont. We merchants hope some day to run the Lowells out of town, *if* we can get a marshal that has guts. Like you."

WALT LEFT the store and went to the livery stable. Joe looked up from his work. "Everything all right?"

"Right as rain."

"Bueno."

Walt peeled off his stained shirt. "You know Mac Robinson, Joe?"

Tarby looked up quickly. "Hell yes! Why?"

"He thinks a lot of you."

"We worked together in the Blue River country for a time. Ain't no better lawman in Arizona Territory than Big Mac; he still as rough as ever?"

"All six feet six of him."

Tarby leaned on his broom. "There's something on your mind, Walt. Out with it!"

Walt ripped the commission out of his shirt lining and handed it to Joe. Joe whistled as he read it. "I'll be damned." He looked up. "You after Carl?"

"Yes."

"I knew you were no saddletramp. I was sure of it after that fracas with Carl and Sonora."

"I need help, Joe."

Joe grinned. "So do I." He went into his office and brought out a paper. He handed it to Walt. It was a letter of authority from the Customs authority commissioning Joseph X. Tarby as a special agent for southern Arizona. Walt looked up at the little man. "You after Carl, too?"

"On the liquor smuggling deal."

"This livery stable a front?"

"No, it's mine all right. I got the agent's assignment after I was here for six months. They knew I was an ex-U.S. marshal. Asked me to keep an eye on Lowell. Maybe we can work together?"

Walt grinned and held out a big hand, gripping Joe's. "You don't know how I need help."

"Me, too," said Joe. "I'm still commissioned as a U.S. Marshal. I've been living on borrowed time in Stirling, Walt. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yes." Walt grinned. "What does the middle initial stand for in your name?"

"Xavier," said Joe dryly, "Let's have a drink. No one else in town knows that, and you'd better not tell them, or it will be the end of a beautiful new friendship."

- 5 -

CARL LOWELL, was gone all that day. Walt had told Joe all he knew. Joe knew, of course, that Carl was dealing in smuggled liquor, and that all of the saloon keepers in Stirling were forced to deal with him. But Joe had not been able to find out how and when Carl got his deliveries. Walt Dyer thought that Josh had been killed because of something that had happened in the smuggling deal, but there was nothing concrete.

When he was through work, he went up to the Lodestar to talk to the manager, George Anderson.

Walt showed him his commission.

"You pay off next week, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Anderson nervously. "What's wrong?"

"There's a possibility the office might be held up."

"How do you know?"

Walt waved a hand. "Take my word for it. How big is the payroll?"

"It's a big one. Over twelve thousand dollars."

Walt whistled. "How is that?"

"The company pays off the stamping mill employees, the teamsters, the men at the smaller mines farther back in the hills, and those here at the Lodestar at one time."

"Rather risky, isn't it?"

"*I* thought so; but I was over-ruled. It takes too much time carrying it around to four different places. One of our shareholders suggested we pay off here at the central office."

"So? Who was that?"

"Carl Lowell."

Walt raised his eyebrows. "How much does he have in the mine?"

"Not a hell of a lot, but the others listen to him; I guess he knows what he's talking about."

"Yeah," said Walt dryly. "He sure does."

"What should I do?"

"How do you get the cash?"

"A draft on the Tucson bank is brought in on the branch line and then up here. We keep it in the safe, but the damned thing could be opened with a can opener."

Walt rubbed his jaw. "Have it brought in as usual. Fill the bags with anything that feels like money. Put the money in a box and move it at night over to the stamping mill. Put guards on it."

"Why not take it over there in the first place?"

Walt grinned. "I need bait, Anderson; cash bait. I want the men who will try to take the payroll. You do as I say, or I won't be responsible for anything that happens."

"Don't worry. You think they might try anything when the train comes in?"

"It will be watched, never fear. I'll keep in touch with you."

As Dyer went down the hill toward town, he thought of Ellen Lowell with a twinge of regret. It would be rough on her when the trap sprung. He had no regrets about Carl Lowell, for Walt's own younger brother, Charley, had been shot down in Holbrook while hurrahing the town with some of the boys from the Hashknife outfit. Charley had been wild—too wild for his father or elder brother to control. He had left home and had not written for two years. Rumors had drifted in about his ways and Walt was sure it had hastened the death of his God-fearing mother. Charley's own end had almost been a relief, for Walt had expected him to wind up at the end of a rope or in boothill.

IT WAS A calm clear night. Walt passed a row of buildings under construction. Something made him slow down, a sixth sense developed from years of law-enforcement work. He looked along a pile of building lumber, stepped into the shadows and picked up a rock. He tossed it down near the end of the pile. Something clicked sharply; hammers being cocked.

Walt Dyer drew his Colt and slipped around the back of the pile. A man was standing in the shadows holding a shotgun, evidently waiting for Dyer to appear. Walt's foot turned on a stone and the man whirled. Walt hit the dirt. The scattergun roared twice, pelting the lumber with shot. Dyer rolled over, freeing his Colt, and fired from the ground. The man cursed, threw down the scattergun and drew his Colt. Walt fired again.

The man grunted, dropped the Colt, and ran around the lumber pile. Walt got to his feet and crouched close to the pile. Boots thudded on the hard earth. His assailant was hitting the road. Dyer looked around the pile to

see the man disappear into the shadows of a gully.

Walt went back and picked up the scattergun; it was like a hundred others he had seen in his time, nothing to distinguish it. He picked up the Colt, .44 with ivory grips. He held it close to his eyes. The initials S. L. were carved into the smooth ivory. It was a Colt exactly like the pair carried by Sid Lowell. S. L. *Sid Lowell.*

Walt shoved the scattergun between the pieces of lumber and thrust the Colt into his waistband, buttoning his coat over it. Things were beginning to warm up.

Ellen Lowell was seated on the front porch of the boarding house when he reached it. He opened the gate. "Good evening, Miss Lowell," he said.

"I heard shooting," she said; "what happened?"

"I don't know. I heard it, too."

"You're late."

"I ate in town." He sat down on the steps. "Thanks for taking care of the shirt," he said. "You didn't have to bother with it."

"It was no trouble," she said quietly. "I knew you had no other with you."

"Les Valmont took care of me," he said.

She was silent, looking out toward the bright lights of the noisy town. "I heard you had a fight with Carl and Sonora," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"It was because you tried to defend that man last night, wasn't it? The man Carl killed."

"Yes, I think so."

"Carl is a dangerous man to cross, Mister Dyer."

"The name is Walter, Miss Lowell."

She smiled. "And mine is Ellen. I hope you don't think poorly of me because of Carl."

"I've had a wild one in my own family, Ellen."

She looked down at him. "Who are you, Walt?"

"A drifter. A liveryman for the time being."

"You do not strike me as a drifter. You seem to be steadier than most of the men in Stirling."

He waved a hand. "You can't tell about men, Ellen."

"I'm not so sure about that. Some men show their true character without any attempt to cover it up. Like you," she said.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken."

"I don't think so."

SPURS JINGLED along the walk. Sid Lowell opened the gate. "Evenin', Ellen; how are you, Walt?"

"Well enough."

"What was the shooting about, Sid?" asked Ellen.

Sid rolled a cigaret. "Shooting? I didn't hear any."

"I don't know how you could have missed it."

Sid eyed Walt as he wet the cigaret paper. "I was too busy, I guess. What happened?"

"We don't know."

Walt glanced at Sid's holsters. His left hand Colt was missing.

"Will you be in town for a time?" asked Ellen.

Sid shrugged. "Hard to say. Carl told me to stay around."

"I'd like to have you go to Tucson for me. I have some business to be done there and I can't get away."

Sid lit his cigaret. His eyes studied Walt over the flare of the match. "I'll talk to Carl," he said.

She stood up. "Why? Does Carl run your life, Sid?"

"We work together."

"Yes. To what end?"

Sid looked up angrily. "Do you have to talk about that in front of this man?"

"Does it make any difference? Will you go to Tucson for me tomorrow?"

He shook his head. "Not before next week, Sis; I'm sorry."

She went to the door. "Good night, Walt. Good night, Sid?"

Sid passed the makings to Dyer. "Nice night, ain't it?"

Walt fashioned a smoke. "You've lost a gun?" he asked.

Sid glanced down, then shook his head. "I left it in the saloon office. Damned trigger is getting too fine; needed a new sear."

Dyer lit up and studied the young man. "Why don't you go to Tucson for Ellen?" he asked.

"What business is that of yours?"

"None," admitted Walt; "she just seemed anxious to have you go."

Sid stood up. "I'll worry about that. See you."

Walt stood up and unbuttoned his coat. "Here is something that belongs to you, Sid." He reached inside his coat. Sid leaped back and slapped his hand down for a draw. Walt eyed him. "Touchy, aren't you?"

Sid flushed, and Dyer took out the ornate Colt. "Here," he said; "and I didn't find it in the saloon office."

Sid took the Colt and slid it into its holster without looking at it. Walt puffed at his cigaret. "I think you'd better think twice about going to Tucson, Sid. Goodnight." Sid was still watching Walt as the ranger went up on the porch and into the house.

- 6 -

IN THE DAYS that followed the attempted drygulching, Walt Dyer managed to keep track of the movements of the Lowells and Sonora through the indefatigable Joe Tarby. Four days before the payroll date, Joe left Stirling late one night and headed for the border. Sid Lowell had left town the day before.

Joe showed up two days before the payroll date. He and Walt went into the livery office and closed the door. "I'm all set," said Joe; "one of our agents located the liquor cache in Sonora, just over the line. They have ten customs men down there waiting for them to deliver it. When they cross the line, we'll have them."

"Will Sid be with them?"

"No. Carl is too smart to let Sid come over the line with the stuff."

"Then how will you tie them in with it?"

Joe grinned. "One of their men is a stoolpigeon. I cornered him this side of the line and put the fear of gawd into him. I offered him a pardon if he would turn evidence against the bunch; he agreed."

"How do you know he'll do it? He might spill the story to Carl."

Joe shook his head. "No. He thinks one of the gang making the delivery is one of our agents watching him. He's scared, I tell you."

Walt gripped the little man by the shoulder. "You sure know your business, Joe."

Joe waved a deprecating hand. "It was nothing; I'm a genius, is all. Now, what about your job?"

"Nothing has changed. I'm wondering where Sid is."

"I haven't seen him."

"No one else has either."

Joe lit a cigar. "I can't figure Sid out; he ain't the type to drygulch a man."

"I didn't actually see him do it, but I found his Colt there," Walt said.

"Circumstantial. Still, he keeps on listening to Carl, and he's liable to get as rotten. It's a lousy business, Walt. What about Ellen?"

Walt shrugged. "She's friendly."

"You think she knows who you are?"

"If she does, she hasn't shown any signs." Walt poured a drink. "Still, Sid has vanished. She might have tipped

him off; I think she wanted him to go to Tucson to get him out of the way."

Joe shook his head. "He wouldn't leave Carl even if she tipped him off."

"She could have told Carl who I am."

"No."

"What makes you think that?"

Joe squinted at Walt through the tobacco smoke. "If she had told Carl, you'd be dead by now. It wouldn't have been bungled like it was the night you went up to the mine. You can bet on that. *You'd be dead by now.*"

"You'll work with me on the mine deal now?"

"Why not? My work on the liquor deal is over. It'll pleasure me to see Carl and that cold-eyed Sonora in Yuma Pen, Walt."

Dyer rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. Providing it all works out."

"What's your plan?"

"We'll keep an eye on the payroll until Anderson gets it out of the office. That night, we'll wait for them up at the mine. I'll get some good men from Anderson and we can spring the trap."

Joe nodded. "They'd *better* be good men. Carl, Sid and Sonora are rough hombres, Walt. If there's any gunplay, it will be hot and heavy for a time."

"Maybe you'd like to keep out of it, Joe?"

"Why, damn you! I'll be there!"

Walt grinned. "Keno!"

"One thing puzzles me, Walt. Carl has a good thing here in Stirling. Why is he planning a job like this? He'd have to leave in a hurry if he got away with it."

"That job up at Cienaga was a mess. I think he knows that. I think he suspects that it will be only a matter of time before he's tracked down. He means to land a good nest egg and pull leather for the border, buy a place in Sonora, and thumb his nose at the authorities over here."

"He's cool. Sitting here knowing someone is after him, waiting his chance."

Walt shrugged. "We can't actually prove he was in on the Cienaga deal until we can get him into custody. The witness we have up north can cinch that deal; I've got the warrant for him. The only thing that has stopped me from arresting him when I first got here was the fact that we never did find out who helped him escape when he was cornered, leaving from Cienaga. We want that man, too."

"Who do you think it was?"

"Sid Lowell."

"That figures."

WALT STOOD up and went to the window. "It will be the death sentence for Carl and a long term for Sid, if it *was* Sid that helped him. If we trap them up at the mine, it won't change things for Carl. He'll still get the rope, but it will make it a hell of a lot worse for Sid."

"You like the kid, don't you? I don't blame you; I like him, too."

Dyer turned. "I liked him until he tried to kill me, Joe. Maybe it's best that we nail him soon, before he gets as bad as Carl. Nits breed lice."

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm just sorry for Ellen Lowell. She'll be the one to suffer."

Walt fashioned a smoke. "Will you do one thing for me, Joe?"

"It's as good as done."

"I've never been sure Sid was in on that Cienaga deal. Can you check about town and find out where he was at the time?"

"Sure thing." Joe stood up and eyed Walt. "You've still got a soft spot for the kid, haven't you?"

"I suppose so. Still, he tried to kill me."

"You didn't actually see him, did you?"

"No." Walt lit his smoke and suddenly a thought struck him. "I shot at the man who tried to kill me. I *might* have hit him—possibly in the right arm, as he dropped the sixgun. As far as I could see, Sid was untouched. Yet, I might have only creased him."

Joe nodded. "I'll look for a man with a bunged arm. I've a feeling I won't have to look far. I'm going to find Sonora."

"Why not Carl?"

Joe shook his head. "I doubt it. It would be just like Sonora to use someone else's gun." He left the office.

Walt kept busy for an hour and then Joe showed up. "Sid left town heading south, two days before Carl went up north; he was as far south as the Rio Yaqui in Sonora. He wouldn't have had time to get back north to help Carl."

"You're sure he was down there?"

Joe nodded. "Bert, the barkeep over at *The Pride,* said a letter addressed to Carl came from Sid in Sonora. He caught a glimpse of it as Carl read it. That places Sid in Sonora rather than up north near Cienaga."

Walt Dyer had a great feeling of relief. Joe came closer to Walt. "Sonora is using his left hand, Walt. Bert said he hurt it the other night."

Walt nodded. "That figures. Sid said he had left his other Colt in the saloon office."

Joe rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. Yet it doesn't make any difference in the long run."

"How so?"

Joe looked Walt in the eye. "If Sid comes up to the mine in an attempted holdup, he'll be in just as deep as Carl."

Walt ground out his cigaret. "That's so," he said quietly. He went back to his work. He had some thinking to do.

THE MINE payroll came in on the noon train. Walt Dyer and Joe Tarby were not far from the station as the mine company employees took the cash bags and placed them in a buckboard. Two of the mine men had double-barreled shotguns. There was no sign of the Lowells or Sonora.

Sid had returned to Stirling the night before. There was no trouble as the payroll was taken up to the Lodestar office. Walt knew that Carl Lowell and Sonora were in town. Joe had tipped him off that two men had come in with Sid the night before; Dan Eddy and Larry Fitch, both of whom had worked with Carl Lowell before. That placed five known men in the Lowell bunch.

There was no night shift at the Lodestar, and the office closed at five thirty; next day was payday. Les Valmont, the clothing store proprietor, had told Joe Tarby that Bert, the head bartender at *The Pride,* had taken over the place as owner. Bert had borrowed two thousand dollars from Valmont to swing the deal. The stage was set.

Walt went to his room at five o'clock. Ellen Lowell met him on the stairs. "You're home early," she said.

Walt smiled. "There wasn't much doing, so we closed early."

"I see. Have you seen Sid?"

"He came in last night."

She bit her lip. "I wanted him to go to Tucson for me," she said.

"Sid has a mind of his own."

"Will you be going out tonight?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I thought you might like to play cards."

Walt shook his head. "I'm sorry. Joe asked me to join his lodge; I'm going to their meeting tonight."

She studied him for a moment. "Some other time?"

"I certainly hope so." Walt watched her go down the stairs. She was worried. How much did she know?

Dyer went into his room, got out his gun-cleaning gear and carefully cleaned his Colt and derringer. He reloaded them with fresh cartridges and then drew a chair to the window. Anderson would soon be moving the payroll down to the stamping mill. He had five good men ready to watch the office. Joe Tarby was watching *The Pride* where the Lowells and their three men were. He was to warn Walt as soon as they left. Walt saw Ellen leave the house and walk up toward town. It was dusk;

he dropped on his bed and dozed off.

The rapping became more insistent. Walt opened his eyes. His room was dark. He got up and went to the door. "Who is it?"

"Joe Tarby."

Walt let the little man in. "What's up?"

"Carl, Sid and Sonora left town ten minutes ago, riding out on the hill trail to the south."

Walt buckled on his gunbelt and settled it. He shrugged into his coat and put on his hat. "What about Fitch and Eddy?"

"They're not in *The Pride.*"

"Let's go." Walt opened the door and went quietly down the stairs. It was almost half past seven.

He reached the hall and turned as someone moved in the parlor. Ellen Lowell came toward them. There was a pistol in her hand. "Where are you going?" she asked.

Walt eyed the handgun. "To the lodge meeting."

"There *isn't* any lodge meeting."

Joe coughed. "Special meeting on new members, Miss Lowell."

"Don't lie to me, Joe."

JOE GLANCED at Walt, who stepped forward. She cocked her pistol. "Stay where you are!" she said.

Walt Dyer eyed her. "Why are you doing this, Ellen?"

Her face was set. "I've known who you are ever since I found that commission in your shirt, Walt."

"So?"

"You've come for Carl, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Let him go, Walt; he's leaving the country tonight."

Dyer shook his head. "Not if we can help it."

She waved the pistol. "Come in here."

Joe shrugged and went into the parlor. He sat down and studied Ellen. "You're worried about Sid, aren't you?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

Walt leaned against the wall. "Stopping us won't save Sid, Ellen; he'll get killed or put into prison soon enough if he keeps on with Carl."

"At least *you* won't have a hand in it."

"You're breaking the law yourself right now, Ellen."

"I know, but I can't let you kill Sid."

Joe grunted. "Maybe you think it's all right for Sid to kill lawmen."

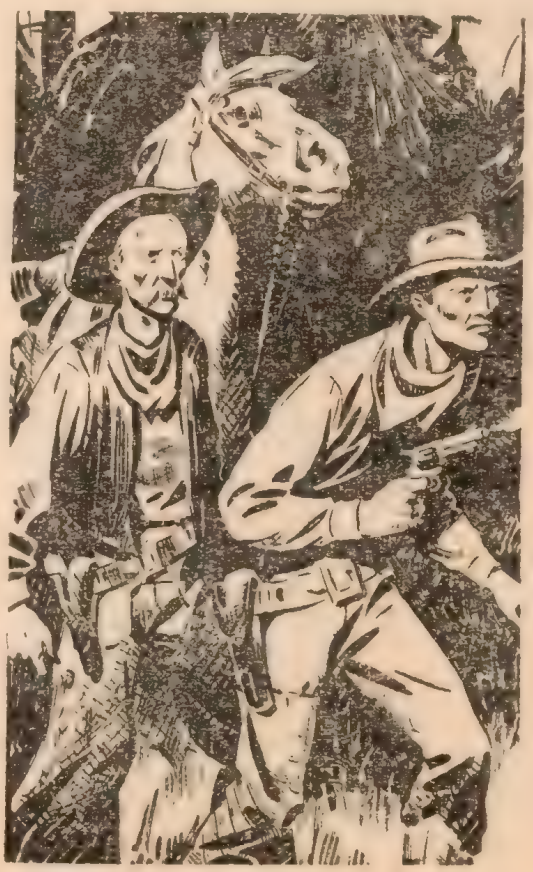
"No! Sid has never killed a man."

"Carl has; more than one, Ellen."

She looked away. "I know; I have no hope for him. But Sid isn't bad at heart—if he was away from Carl, he'd be all right."

Walt rubbed his jaw. "You won't let us go then?"

"You'll stay here until they're clear of town!"



"You think they're leaving town?"

"Carl sold *The Pride*. They're heading for the Rio Yaqui in Sonora."

"Yeah," said Joe quietly, *"after* they try to take the mine payroll."

She whirled. "You're lying! Sid said they were leaving without doing anything like that in Arizona."

Dyer stepped forward. She whirled. Walt flipped his hat at her face. She was startled and jerked her head sideways.

Joe leaped up and twisted her wrist. The Colt dropped to the floor. Joe uncocked it and slid it under his belt. "All right, Walt," he said, "let's go."

Walt went to Ellen. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but you were wrong."

Tears were in her eyes as she looked up. "You wouldn't understand."

"I think I do. I had a younger brother shot down by a marshal in Holbrook for breaking the law. This isn't easy for me, Ellen."

She looked up at him. "Go on then," she said. "It's too late for me to help him now." Suddenly he kissed her and then he ran after Joe. His heart was sick within him. There would be shooting if he knew men like Carl and Sonora. If the kid stopped lead, Walt would never be able to see Ellen again.

IT WAS DARK as they walked up the hill toward the mine. A coyote howled somewhere off in the desert to the east, a melancholy cry of foreboding. A cool wind searched through the brush. Below the hill, they could see the yellow lights of the town.

Joe suddenly stopped and gripped Walt by the wrist. "Wait!"

They stopped. Suddenly there was a blossom of red flame at the mine office, not two hundred yards from them. A man yelled. Hooves clattered on the hard earth. Five shots ripped out with a noise as though someone had dragged a stick down a picket fence. A horse screamed in agony. Then the whole side of the hill seemed to erupt into gun explosions.

Then three horsemen appeared, lashing their mounts down the trail toward Walt Dyer and Joe Tarby. Joe jerked out his Colt. Walt jumped to one side. Shots crashed out higher on the hill. Suddenly Walt recognized Sonora heading toward him, followed by Carl and Sid Lowell.

Joe fired. Sonora cursed and sagged in the saddle. Carl Lowell fired and Joe staggered over against a rock. Sonora bent low and crossed his gun hand over his body. Walt drew and fired twice. Sonora threw up his hands and hit the ground, his right foot caught in the stirrup. The bay thundered down the brushy slope dragging the helpless man over the sharp rocks.

Carl was past them now. Sid was fighting his rearing claybank. Joe fired at Carl; the tall man yelled and turned in the saddle. His gun rattled. Joe fired once before he pitched to the ground. Carl jerked and slid from the saddle.

Walt Dyer jumped behind a rock, driving a slug into Sid's claybank. The horse went down and Sid cleared him. Walt's Colt was empty; he dropped it and went for his derringer. Sid was ten feet away, and he raised his Colt. It clicked emptily. It was a sure shot for Walt; he cocked the stingy gun as Sid drew his left hand Colt. It was easy, but something held Walt's hand. Sid fired. There was a sound as though a stick had been whipped into thick mud and Walt whirled sideways as the slug smashed into his holster with a blow like a mallet. He went down and rolled over. Sid was running for Carl's black. Walt snatched up Joe's Colt and steadied it on the back of the fleeing kid. Then he lowered it. Sid swung up on the black and gave it the steel; he plunged down the slope toward the desert as Walt holstered the Colt.

George Anderson and his men came down the hill. "You all right, Walt?" he yelled.

"Yes, but Joe is hit."

Anderson's men emptied their guns

into the brush where Sid had fled. There was a triumphant wolf howl far down the slope and the thud of hooves. Anderson cursed. "Got clean away; who was it, Walt?"

"I don't know."

Anderson helped Walt to his feet. "We killed Dan Eddy with the first volley. Larry Fitch was hit hard; he won't live."

A man looked up from where he knelt beside Carl. "He's dead," he said.

Another man dragged Sonora from the brush. "Sonora won't ride the owl-hoot trail any more," he said quietly.

They picked up Joe and carried him down the hill. Anderson helped Walt, whose hip was still numb. They carried Joe into a house and placed him on a couch. Blood soaked his left trouser leg. One of the men ran for a doctor.

Anderson rolled a cigaret and gave it to Walt. Walt went out on the porch and sat down. A woman hurried up the path. "Is that you, Walt?" she asked. It was Ellen Lowell.

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"A little shaken up, is all." He looked up at her. "Joe was hit, but he'll live."

She came close. "My brothers..."

He looked away. "Carl is dead; Sid got away." He took her by the hand. "No one saw Sid; they can't say he was there."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, but the others didn't."

She came close to him. "Thank God."

Walt held her close. "I'm sorry about Carl," he said.

She shook her head. "There was no hope for him. He died the way he lived."

Walt kissed her. "It's all over," he said. "They'll never catch Sid now. I'm glad. For my sake as well as yours." He looked south toward the border. Some day, when he was out of the Rangers, they might ride south to the Rio Yaqui in Sonora. He was sure they'd find Sid Lowell down there, living a decent life.

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RAINBOW BY THE TAIL

by James P. Olsen

REMOVING the cartridge belt from around his lean middle, Lew Quest folded it around the cutaway holster that sheathed a Colt .45 and shoved the killer gear into a saddle bag. It was his way of paying homage outside a shrine before passing through its sacred portals.

Hungrily, then, like a kid outside a sweetshop window, Quest feasted his eyes on the town that lay just ahead, seeing the chimney smoke rise lazily above the deep green of spruce and the rioting yellow and vivid scarlet of frost-struck aspens. Listening, he heard the sharp blows of an axe and heard the chuckle of a stream that half-mooned the town. Above all, he sensed an air of peace and well-being that lulled and comforted, yet at the same time made a man feel gloriously alive.

"Mirac." Quest breathed the town's name softly. "Short for 'Miracle', and little short of one."

Easy in the saddle, he rode on to a short street that was topped with white sand from the stream, and flanked by gravel sidewalks and low log buildings. Save for himself, the street was unpeopled, but it wasn't the ominous desertion presaging violence that Lew Quest had too often known.

Dismounting in front of the wide-

porched general store, Quest rolled and lighted a cigarette and was surprised that it tasted so good. Everything here, he thought, would be good and pleasant—if a man could stay. With such thoughts in mind, the sharp intrusion of a loud, harsh voice jarred Quest roughly and brought him halfway around, his right hand moving fluidly toward the sixgun he no longer packed. Frowning, he eyed the jasper who'd disturbed his own and Mirac's peace. A half-breed, by his looks, he stood in front of Mirac's one saloon and shook one fist at a bent oldster standing in the doorway.

"By damn," he squalled, "I'm show you to don't let Cultus Charley have a dreenk. Sometime I take thees town to parts!"

"You'll ride out and stay out," the old man told him.

"I'm ride you, ol' bassard!" the 'breed raged as he slashed at the oldster with a split-tailed, copper-tipped quirt that had dangled from his wrist. The old man reeled back and the 'breed, slipping his hand through the loop, reversed the quirt and brought the loaded butt down on his head, driving him to his knees. The quirt was raised to strike again when Quest snatched it from behind, spun the 'breed around and lashed him savagely across the face. Screaming, tangling his own feet, he fell and huddled on the walk while the quirt rose and fell with sickening regularity.

"You reckon you got him tender enough by now?"

The firm, even voice penetrated the pounding in Quest's ears. Stepping back, he flung the quirt at the 'breed and pulled the back of one trembling hand across his eyes.

"Trouble. Everywhere I go!" he panted.

The man who'd spoken to Quest, tall, ruddy-cheeked, with a snowy mustache, said wryly, "I'd reckon Cultus Charley's had *his* fill of trouble as of now," and studied Quest shrewdly. Reading Quest's brand, he noted the lines around his mouth and the spot on his gray wool pants where a gun had kept sun and weather from fading the cloth. Then he looked at Cultus Charley, who'd dragged himself onto his horse.

"I'm geet even," Cultus croaked as he rode away.

QUEST shrugged. Stony faced, he looked around at the men who'd gathered at the scene. They eyed him back briefly and with quiet reserve. A few nodded as the group began drifting away, but Quest had no attention to give them now. He was staring at a girl following two men who were helping the man the 'breed had slugged away. A small, slender person with big, dark eyes in a pixy-like face, her short bronze-hued hair brushed the collar of her gaudy blanket coat. There was something so vital and contagiously happy about her that it made Quest happy and he was smiling after her when, for the second time, the firm, even voice brought him back to reality.

"You seemed pretty bitter, there" the old man said. "Sort of like it wasn't him you was beating on, as much as you were pounding a symbol of something you purely want to forget."

"You see a lot." Quest smiled wryly.

"I've *seen* a lot, anyhow." The other smiled.

"Well, I am sorry I run into trouble—especially here in Mirac," Quest admitted, adding, "Even if you don't lock me up for overdoing that whipping maybe a little bit, marshal."

"Oh," the older man chuckled, "I'm not the marshal. That was Bill Reeves, the marshal, that Cultus Charley jumped... That Cultus! He holes up in the foothills, packing grub and running errands for owlhooters since we ran him out of town for being drunk and mean most of the time."

"Yeah. I've heard that Dave Tyrus,

who owns this town, makes short stay and long leavings of troublemakers," Quest remarked.

"Don't let Dave Tyrus fret you," the old man advised. "Tyrus, he dreamt this town and built it, but he don't own it. It belongs to the folks who love and enjoy it, like they do that range out there."

Sweeping one hand toward the distant mountains, the man continued: "It's some sixty miles—though it looks ten—to those peaks. In between, a dozen cow outfits uses the range with Tyrus and there's no trouble. See what I mean, Mister—"

"Lew Quest," Quest supplied.

"I'm Dave Tyrus." Tyrus stuck out his right hand.

Quest laughed. "Then I take it I can stay awhile?"

"Why not, Quest? But with everything buttoned down for the winter, what do you aim to do for a living here?"

"To tell the truth," Quest admitted, "I hadn't thought about what I'd do if I ever grabbed my rainbow by the tail. Just getting hold of it seemed enough."

DAVE TYRUS turned, then, and smiled at the girl who came back from the doctor's to report, "Bill Reeves isn't badly injured, Uncle Ty. Only in his pride. And he sends his thanks to this gentleman." She nodded at Quest.

"Lew Quest, Gay," Tyrus said. "Quest, my niece, Gay Ferris."

Quest took the small warm hand the girl offered and said, "Gay Ferris. What a happy name you have, miss."

"Mr. Quest." She wrinkled her pert, freckled nose at him. "Do you always say such nice things?"

"Never before," he assured her. "But, then, I've never met such a nice girl before."

"You're fun," Gay stated. 'I hope you stay in Mirac."

"Well," Tyrus offered, "there's an empty cabin and a few horses to be broke. That pinto of yours for one, Gay."

"I'd do it myself if you'd let me," Gay pouted.

"No doubt," Tyrus dryly agreed. "But you're all I have, and too precious for me to allow you the risk.

"All right, Uncle Ty." She gave him a quick hug. "But I can show Lew the horses and where he's going to live."

Getting his horse, Quest looped the reins over one arm and stepped off long and proud as he and Gay started toward a slope atop which were the big log house, the barns and corrals that marked the headquarters of the Tyrus Circle T. Every few steps, little Gay had to skip to keep up with Quest, until she finally grabbed his hand. That way, clasped hands swinging, they went on up "Tyrus Knob" as the hill was called.

Showing him where to stable his horse, and pointing out the ones he was to break in a round corral, Gay led Quest on to a cabin in a clump of spruce. "It belonged to our headquarters foreman," she explained. "He had to go south because of his health."

Inside, they inspected the kitchen stove and looked around the other room. In there, there were a few chairs near the fireplace, a table and a built-in corner bunk. "It isn't so much," Gay said, "but it can be fixed up real nice."

She left him then. A girl entirely without subterfuge, yet she was alert to another's feelings and sensed when a man might better be alone.

"A nice place?" Quest echoed Gay's words. Hell, there never was a place like this before, or a man like Dave Tyrus, or a girl like Gay Ferris, and Quest couldn't remember a time when he'd felt as good as now. So good, he slammed his hat down and kicked it plumb across the room!

He started on the horses that afternoon, and when he got back to the

cabin, he knew Gay had been there. The bunk was made up with down soogans and Yukon rildies, there were two Indian rugs on the floor and man-type pictures on the wall. Quest was amost reluctant to go out after needed supplies.

DOWN AT the store, the proprietor, Pete Brandon, greeted him, "Hello, Quest," and introduced him to the wife of a Circle T rider. Most of the outfit's married men lived around town. The single ones held down the far-flung camps. When the woman left, Brandon remarked, "Hear you're working for Tyrus, Quest. Uh— If your poke's lean, your tick's heap fat here."

"Thanks. I can use some credit, Pete. But my job's just something Tyrus dug up to help me out, it ain't permanent."

"That so?" Brandon showed Quest a crooked grin.

It was like that all around. Folks were friendly and accepted Quest, but with a reserve to be expected. He was on trial with everyone but Gay, and aware of it. With Gay, there was no reserve. She liked him and made no beans about it. They took long rides together and she teased him about his reticence with her, but didn't fish for compliments. She was a friendly girl and Quest, not figuring it could ever be anything more, told her very little about himself. He mentioned ranch work he'd done years before, and things like that. But he figured a man should have something solid to offer a girl like Gay before he had the need or right to lay everything before her. So he didn't talk about certain shadows in his past.

You can't shake your shadow, though. Quest was reminded of that fact one morning when the twice-weekly stage pulled up and unloaded the mail and a drummer with a pile of bags. Stepping forward, Quest asked, "Can I help you with them, friend?"

Blinking, the drummer leaned toward him for a better look. Then, addressing the small crowd around them, he cried, "To think I'd see the day when Mister Boothill would offer to help carry my grips! *Boothill*! Man, what're you doing here?"

"From now on, keeping my big mouth closed," Quest flung back over his shoulder as he strode away.

Turning his coat collar up against the cold, his mood as gray as the sky now was, Quest went up on Tyrus Knob. Restless and uneasy, he had to occupy himself, and was teaching Gay's pinto to kneel when a discreet cough caused him to look around to find Gay watching him, her expression very sober. Coming out of the corral, he faced her and said, "I guess you've heard?"

"That you're Mister Boothill? Oh, I knew that before I heard the news awhile ago. Uncle Ty knew about you and mentioned it to me. He said you'd tell me yourself whenever there was any reason that you should."

"It's a short tale and soon twisted," Quest told her. "Cow work couldn't hold me. I was a stagecoach guard, fought in a line war and a water feud and became a deputy and a marshal in frontier towns. The bad ones hated me because they were jealous of their own gun reps, and they had a crazy pride that wouldn't allow them to let me arrest them—so they had to try their luck and sixgun savvy against mine. I was always the fastest and luckiest, so I got that Boothill monicker because I sent them to boothill instead of taking them alive."

Pausing, Quest shifted restlessly then went on: "Maybe I grew up. I don't know. But I got almighty sick of bloodshed, and folks shying away from me, and nobody I could call a friend. I'd heard of Mirac, and here I am... Say, it's started to snow!"

"'It's started to snow,'" Gay mocked him. "What a way to finish a story. Isn't there a fairy princess whom you marry and live with happily ever after?"

Head back, she waited for his answer. And got it! Pulling her to him, Quest kissed her, long and ardently.

"Lew!" Gay gasped and stepped back when it was over.

Troubled, Quest said, "Didn't you want me to kiss you?"

"Of course I did." Gay laughed. "Do you expect me to say 'Oh, this is so sudden', when I intended it from the start?"

"Why, you little devil!" Quest grabbed at her.

Still laughing, Gay eluded him and ran toward the house.

SLOWLY, in a happy daze, Quest went to his cabin. He was sitting there beside the fire, when Dave Tyrus called his name and then came in. Brushing snowflakes off his shoulders, Tyrus took a chair and without preamble, said, "I got a little medicine to make with you, Quest."

"I expected you would," Quest nodded. "And I want to say, that when I let Gay know how I felt about her, I just didn't think of my past, or how little I had to offer a girl who'll someday inherit a bank, and a spread like circle T, and all."

"Ah, shut up," Tyrus snarled. "I come to offer you the job of foreman of the home spread here. And it's because I think you're the man for it, and not because you and Gay are in love—which I could see all along, even if you couldn't."

"And you don't mind?" Quest mumbled.

"Hell, *I* ain't marrying you!" Tyrus snorted. "That's Gay's lookout, and I figger she knows what she wants. Me, I'm glad to get a man like you for a nephew who can someday step into my boots and shoulder a helluva lot of work and responsibility. You see, Quest, Gay's husband will be responsible for the well-being, the peace and happiness of those who love this range and Mirac, like you've shown me you love it, too."

"Those people," Quest muttered, staring into the fire. "Now that they know I'm Mister Boothill, they'll be watching for some gunnie to ride in and challenge me. Or they'll be waiting to see if I'll kill my way out of any trouble that comes up. Either way, they'll never accept me and won't be happy about me. Mirac wouldn't be a happy place, and Gay and me wouldn't be happy knowing I was spoiling things."

"They'll learn to accept you, so don't try solving problems, that might never come up, ahead of time. And don't be one of those fools who throws his cutter away in blind hopes that that's the way to settle things!" Tyrus growled.

"I come here to rope my rainbow, not to crucify myself or commit suicide." Grinning thinly, Quest slid his hand under his shirt and drew a stingy .44 out of a shoulder rig.

Snow, swirled by a cutting wind, continued to fall when Quest came out the next morning, and Mirac lay serene under a white blanket as he went down the slope and over to the saloon. Alone at the bar, a steaming Tom and Jerry in front of him, the ticking clock making a comfortable sound, Quest was thinking how good and peaceful this life was when he heard the muffled drumming of running horses in the street, and then a high-pitched yell, "Bank robb'ry! They robbed the bank!"

Low in their saddles, four riders raced past the saloon as Quest leaped out, and the nearest one, twisting toward him, slammed a shot that went wide and spider-webbed the saloon window. In the brief time the man's head was turned, Quest glimpsed his twisted, pock-marked face, and his exclamation, "Cultus Charley!" blended

with the bark of his stingy-gun. It was no weapon for running targets at such a distance, and the four rode on and lost themselves behind the curtain of falling snow.

Cursing, Quest started for the bank. Along the street, doors had popped open and others ran that way, too. Swerving, Quest headed for Tyrus Knob. At the stable, Quest saddled his horse, rode up to the cabin and went in. Stuffing his coat pockets with chunks of cornbread and a box of .30-30 cartridges, he buckled on his Colt, grabbed up his rifle and went out.

AS HE RODE down to the street, Quest looked toward the bank. Men were milling around there, but few if any of them were young enough or the kind who'd be much help to Quest—even if they'd had the stomach to ride with Mister Boothill, who'd made his name by making men dead at trail's end. Seeing Quest, someone called his name. He lifted one hand and rode on.

Beyond the town, the trail of the four riders was still very plain, the far-apart hoofprints of the horses showing that they were still being hard run. Out here on the rolling flats, the wind slammed a man unchecked and Quest, hunching his shoulders as it drove at his back, put his horse into a steady lope.

As the miles fell behind, Quest busied his mind, and wondered if this trouble wasn't in a measure his own fault. Maybe, he thought, if he hadn't lost his temper and quirted Cultus Charley so damned badly, the 'breed wouldn't have been goaded to getting even with him and the town by bringing three wild ones with him and sticking up the bank. In that case, a quirt was shaping Quest's destiny, putting him on the trail of men he had to bring back alive. Dead, they'd cause Mirac to regard him as Mister Boothill forever more.

As the day grew older it became colder. Snow particles, driven by a zero wind, hit Quest's back like birdshot. The cold bit through his gloves and clothing. His feet were numb and he stumbled when he jumped off his horse and ran, to warm himself, until he was breathless.

It was getting along into the afternoon and the mountains were looming nearer when Quest sighted his quarry ahead. As they jog-walked their horses over the skyline, Quest put his own mount into a hard run, and when he topped the next rise and sighted them again, he'd pulled up to within long rifle shot of them. Driving on, he continued to close the gap until one of them glanced back and spotted him.

Confusion followed that discovery. Two of the four bumped each other as they reined their horses around. A third flashed his sixgun and emptied it futilely in Quest's direction. Cultus Charley, dragging his saddle-gun from its boot, came around facing Quest, who had his carbine to his shoulder. The carbine cracked sharply and Cultus Charley's horse half reared, then dropped under him. Landing on his feet, the 'breed ran to another rider and grabbed the stirrup leather to pull himself up behind the man. Quest sucked in his breath and held his fire as the rider kicked Cultus Charley in the chest. Stumbling, the 'breed went for his sixgun. The other's sixgun lifted and lined down, lifted and came down again. Gunned down, Cultus Charley fell in a dead, rag-doll heap.

"Honor among thieves," Quest whispered, drawing a bead on the killer's horse. "So they won't be slowed carrying double, they shoot one of their bunch... Pack double, anyway, damn you!"

Quest's carbine spat and the horse dropped. As its rider landed running, the other two men acted together. Pulling their rifles, they alternated shots that drove Quest angling away from them. At that range, it was hell's

own luck that a bullet gouged Quest's upper arm and rocked him against his saddlehorn. Cursing, he ran his horse into a concealing swale.

REINING around, Quest pulled up. Fighting to make his numbed arm obey his will, he lifted his rifle and waited. Nobody showed on the skyline, and Quest's lips curled. Smart men would have run him down—or tried to—knowing he was hit. Or they'd have tried to shoot his horse and leave him afoot. But all the kind he dealt with now could think of was to run. Run for the mountains; run until darkness cloaked them. Run! Running now, they'd be slowed by one horse carrying double, unless another one of them was shot to ease that burden.

Riding back, Quest could see no sign

of a downed man, or one afoot. Putting his own horse into a run, he began to ride a wide, far circle, keeping below the skyline, taking advantage of swales and rises to keep out of sight. More than an hour of that kind of riding brought Quest into a small patch of brush and cottonwoods, and put him between his quarry and the mountains. Leaving his tired horse at the far edge of the shelter, he walked through and looked back north. A mile away, dark blots in the thickening gloom of oncoming darkness, three men on two horses were heading for this bit of shelter too.

Quest's left arm had stiffened and blood that seeped down had frozen on his thin glove. To limber up and warm himself, he moved around gathering sticks and leaves into a pile, and then went back and stood behind a tree, his Colt in hand, and watched the three men ride on up.

Coming into the trees, the trio passed within a few feet of Quest. Vague shapes in the near darkness, they slid to the ground as men do who are bone weary and dazed by bitter cold.

"All right!" Quest's voice was a whiplash at their backs. "Stand hitched and claw for clouds!"

Caught flat-footed, stiff with cold, there wasn't a damned thing they could do but cuss and shove their hands above their heads. Quest, moving up, yanked their guns and tossed them into the brush. Backing off, he rapped out, "Down on your bellies and root hog or die, with your hands behind you. And make one move—"

He didn't have to finish the sentence for them. They went down and rooted while Quest cut the rope from the nearest saddle, cut it into three lengths and tied their hands behind their backs.

"There's a pile of wood ahead of you," Quest said when he straightened up, the last man tied. "Get to it and sit."

Damning him, they rolled over and struggled to their feet, then stumbled over and sat down. Holstering his Colt, Quest hunkered and struck a match to the fire he'd laid. The flames took hold, leaped up, and Quest studied his captives in the rising light. He knew none of them, but he'd known many of their type: Men without imagination to bother them and with no regard for human life. Killer-cunning devils, and deadly—even trapped as these three were.

"You." Quest spoke to the black-bearded man directly across the fire from him. "What name you using now?"

Glaring back, his eyes red with cold, he snorted, "Smith."

'If five million other Smiths can stand it, I can, too," Quest agreed, then looked at the second man and added, "So I guess your name'll be Jones. And you can be Bravo," he told the third one. "It takes a brave snake to gun down a man like you gunned down Cultus Charley this afternoon."

"Gimme a chance at you an' you'll join him," the man Quest called Bravo snarled.

THE one Quest had nominated to be Jones put in, "Look, fella, there's a heap of gold we ain't counted yet, over in my saddlebags. Half of it's yourn if—"

"Why, friend," Quest cut in, "you'd better be glad I'm not the offer-taking kind. If I was, I'd simply shoot you and take it all."

"We are glad," Smith said softly. "I can see we winged you pretty well back there, and it's a long way to Mirac."

"Oh, there'll be a posse along," Quest assured him easily.

"Like hell!" Smith hooted. "There wasn't no sign of one behind us, an' you know damn well there ain't one comin' out with this storm blowin' an' it gettin' colder all the time."

"Didn't need a posse to catch you,

and I don't think it'll take one to get you back. Now, shut up and get some rest. I think you're going to need it," Quest said, and put more wood on the fire.

"Sure, we'll rest," Bravo jeered. "Smith, you an' Jones get what snooze you can. I'll watch for this smart son to go to sleep. We'll take turns dozin' an' watchin' him."

Chuckling grimly, the two leaned and rested their foreheads on their knees. Inwardly damning them, Quest warned, "I can tie you to trees, don't forget."

"An' one of us might work loose while you're so sound asleep nothin' can wake you," Jones hooted.

Or we could all freeze to death, Quest thought.

Well, if he couldn't rest, there'd be none for anyone, and the trail was the way for that. Hating his decision, he rose, got his horse and led it up. Taking the loot-heavy saddlebags off Smith's horse he transferred them to his own saddle and then, Smith's rope in hand, walked toward the three.

"Hey," Jones squawked as Quest tied them by their necks in the center and at both ends of the rope. "What the hell you think you're doin' now?"

"Choke or drag you to death, you try any sandies while I'm taking you back to Mirac," Quest calmly replied while he fixed his own rope to the one linking them and tied the other end hard and fast to his saddlehorn.

His arm was throbbing and bleeding again and he had to lean against his horse and gather the strength to mount. When he'd made it, Bravo protested, "Facin' the wind in this cold, with our hands tied behind us, we'll freeze inside an hour."

Leaning in the saddle, knife in hand, Quest had them back up one at a time while he cut the ropes from their wrists. Straightening, then, he ordered, "Smith. Bravo. Climb your nags. Jones, you walk a while. All right, move on out!"

WITH Quest some twenty feet behind them, they moved out into the mean fury of the storm. The full blast of the wind hit them, rocked them, sucked the breath out of them out there, and Quest was almost glad when it ceased cutting him and he became numbed all over. His feet like ice lumps in the stirrups, he pulled his neckerchief over his nose and held his hands under his armpits inside his coat, while an overpowering drowziness beat down his stubborn resistance. Dozing, he awoke with a start to find himself almost on top of his captives. They'd stopped and were waiting, twisted in the saddle, Jones ready to grab him from the ground.

Pulling back, Quest fumbled his six-gun from the holster and fired a shot above their heads. "Three wise men," he bawled. "Smith, you and Bravo get down and unsaddle. All three of you can walk from here on in."

When their saddles hit the ground and the two horses turned and drifted with the storm, Quest rapped out, "Start walking, and keep apart. I'll be riding with my gun cocked, and I'll have no more tricks out of you."

Riding on after the three out at the end of his rope, Quest envied them. Walking, they could maintain a degree of warmth he had to deny himself. He hadn't the strength for walking, and couldn't risk a fall. One slip and they'd be swarming all over him. Setting his teeth, he tried to shift his Colt to his almost useless left hand and nearly dropped it. After that, he kept the gun in his right hand and rested the weight of it on his saddlehorn.

Time lost meaning for Quest after

that. He managed to get his sack of smoking tobacco out of his pocket and rub some in his eyes so the smart and sting would keep them open. He lost the sack and almost rocked from the saddle as he hauled rein suddenly to keep from riding up on the three ahead again.

"I told you!" Quest raged and drove a shot close to their feet, and the gun didn't even feel like it was his hand it was in.

"Snowdrift," Smith s q u a w k e d. "We're restin' right here."

Without a word, Quest rode off at an angle. Shouts were cut short as the rope tightened and he dragged the three around the drift. Gasping, they scrambled to their feet when he at last gave them slack. Cursing him, they bent their heads and plodded ahead again. There were other drifts to go wide around or plow through during the terrible hours of sub-zero darkness that remained. Sometimes, when the three ahead fell, Quest would let them catch their breath then drive them on in a voice he could hardly recognize as his own.

Daylight, gray and unfriendly, broke to Quest's right, then, and he knew he was headed in the right direction still. How far off course he might be, he couldn't tell, and by now he damned near couldn't even care.

When he let the three miserable wretches ahead of him rest, they stared back and up at him, and were rankly afraid of that unmoving, terrible figure whose sunken eyes stared fixedly at them over a bandana stiff with his frozen breath. They eyed the cocked gun in the hand that rested and held the reins on the saddlehorn, and twisted their necks that were raw from the ropes around them. Any ideas or hopes for escape had gone out of them. All they wanted to do was rest. Rest and die, if that went with it. And that devil driving them wouldn't let them die. He just kept driving them on and on.

That was the way the small posse, led by the sheriff from the county seat, with Dave Tyrus riding at his stirrup, intercepted them later on that day. Trailing them, because they wouldn't let her ride with the posse, was a small girl on a pinto pony that Quest had gentled for her.

It was the outlaw, Smith, who, sitting on the ground, pointed a shaking finger at Quest and babbled hysterically, "Hang us. Lock us up. Jest git us away from *him*!"

Quest sat unmoving. He didn't speak. He didn't hear Tyrus call his name. Riding over, Tyrus laid a hand on Quest's shoulder, and Quest leaned slowly, like a toppling tree. They grabbed him and lowered him to the ground.

"Here. Lemme take his pistol," someone said, then cried, "Migawd in heaven, his hand's froze hard as ice around his gun!"

At least that's the way they tell it in Mirac. And it's the reason no eager-for-glory gunmen ride there to challenge the sixgun prowess of the quiet man who'll someday step into Dave Tyrus' boots and fill them to the satisfaction of every one, even though he's minus most of his toes from frostbite. There's no glory gunning for a man whose right hand has been amputated well above the wrist.

They're mighty proud of Lew Quest in Mirac. They'll point out how he could have ridden off and left his captives to die, most likely, while he spared himself. But he didn't, and it proved forever that Mister Boothill had ceased to exist—if he ever really did.

Lew Quest doesn't seem to mind that right hand being gone. In fact, he is a very happy man. It takes only one arm to squeeze a wife the size of Gay, and only one hand to hold a rainbow firmly and forever by the tail...

★

Bill Galley was strictly from two-bit, when it came to playing the tough gunman's role. He had to be discouraged, fast, before filled a gunman's grave!

THE SHOWDOWN

by A. A. Baker

JEB STOCKTON leaned against the adobe wall; his constable's star glinted in the soft moonlight. The black shirt and heavy black pants, draping over his short boots, seemed to absorb the moon's glow. The stained walnut gun butts cast a long shadow against the red adobe.

Jeb was in the alley behind the Lode Street bars. A man with a purpose as firm as the hard lines in his shadowed face. The saloons were closing for the night and he could hear the retiring bootheels shuffle along the boardwalk. The jingle of harness, a racuous shout of goodnight, the creak of saddles, floated to his hiding place as the men headed for home, or some lonely canyon ranch in the backlands of Rock County.

The cigaret was dry in his mouth. He moved it around with his tongue to keep the twirly from sticking to his lips. He reached for a match, then realizing he would be exposed by a glowing cigaret, quickly broke the match between his stained fingers.

A last pair of bootheels rapped on the boardwalk, then into the sand between the building and crunched toward Jeb Stockton. His lips quirked as he clenched his fists and warmed the knuckles with a hand washing movement. A bulky shadow came first as it led the constable's victim forward. The gunbelt creaked with his

youthful swagger, a bright buckle twinkled against a lean waist. Mexican spurs jangled against velvet darkness. The white buttons of his cambric shirt winked.

"Bill—" Stockton called lightly, then snapped. "Bill Galley! Step over here."

Galley halted his walk and half crouched, arms crooked at the elbow, hands forked the draw. He stared around, trying to locate the voice. He was a fighting machine, ready to explode. Young, tough and willing, but a twitch to his mouth and the darting eyes brought a curve of cynicism to the Constable's face.

Without haste, Jeb Stockton stepped forward, grasped his short brimmed hat by the peak and slapped Galley full in the face. The man clawed for his guns and Stockton hit out hard with a balled fist. The blow caught darting right arm at the bicep and the arm jerked, like a flipped pumphandle, and missed the gun. Stockton struck again and Galley lost balance and sprawled in the sand.

"Get on your feet! Don't make any noise, Galley, you're going to take a beating and you wouldn't want your friends to know it."

"What's goin' on?" The youth tried to keep the natural panic of his voice. "You're..."

"Yeah—I'm the constable," Stockton finished. "Right now I'm doing the unpleasant part of my duty, but I'm doing it. You've been lugging that six gun around—" Stockton searched for words— "like a *real* man, a real tough hombre—which you ain't. A smart fighting man'd never let himself get slapped around in an alley. Now, get onto your feet!"

GALLEY bunched his knees and tensed his bent body. His hands pushed against the sand as he suddenly rammed his length forward and tried to grasp Stockton around the waist. Deliberately, Stockton raised a knee and the crash of bone against flesh was heard. The young man staggered erect, bit back a curse and hoisted his colt out of its holster. Swiftly, Stockton reached out and clamped a rigid hold onto the cocked hammer. Galley's hand turned white with the pressure he asserted on the trigger. The gunbarrel turned sideways and Stockton gave a sharp twist and stepped back with the gun.

"Jumpin' me!" The words spat out of Galley's mouth. "Jumpin' me like this just cause you're scared of..."

"Yeah, I'm scared to death," drawled the constable.

"You are!" muttered Galley. "You're scared to death of Rebel Cark." A sudden thought added viciousness to his words. "You're hidin' in alleys, tryin' to bushwhack Cark, but I walk in an' *you* thought it was Rebel!"

"Maybe you're right, but—" the words rolled out with a grunt as the constable drew back and his fist smacked Galley's jaw— *"you'll* do!" There was another grunt as his fist landed again. Galley recovered and charged, smashing. He caught Stockton a full blow in the teeth and followed with another that peeled the skin from the tight frozen face.

The harsh breathing of the fighters continued as they traded blows. Blood streamed from a cut over Galley's right eye and splattered the fists of the constable. Finally, Stockton feinted with his left hand, stepped in close and delivered an undercut. Galley staggered back, exposing his taut stomach. Stockton rammed a red fist six inches above the gleaming buckle and felt his knuckles sink. The breath spouted out of Galley's open mouth as his body crashed against a wooden barrel. His eyes were wide as he slumped in the dirt, trying to draw air into his paralyzed chest. Stockton stepped back and began tucking in his shirt.

"Now—that's lesson number one, Bill." He scooped the revolver out of the dust and methodically shucked out

the cartridges. "Next time you hear a whisper in a dark alley, *don't* go into a gunfighter's squat and look around. Pull your gun and start shooting when you first hear someone. That'll hurry the killer and maybe he'll miss, or move, so's you can see him."

He leaned down, showing the bullets in his hand to the gasping, big boned youth. "You're gun's empty. Wear it that way until I tell you that you can wear it loaded. I'll be watching and, if I think it's loaded when I see you next time—I'll plug you." He grinned at the stricken look. "Oh, don't worry—I won't let on to anyone that your fangs've been pulled. It'll just be something that you and I know. You can act just as tough, but remember, if *I* think it's loaded..."

Galley began drawing long staggered breaths as his muscles relaxed. Stockton dropped the gun into the dirt, turned his back and walked out of the alley. Bill Galley's lips were taut as his heavy lidded eyes stared after the straight back of the constable.

THE FOLLOWING morning, Jeb Stockton waited in Judge Barrow's office. He leaned against the wall, precariously balanced in a round backed chair. His bootheels hooked the lower rungs, his toes were propped against a ridge in the board floor.

The door banged open. Judge Barrow slammed his way into the room, loosened the string tie, spread the tails of his black coat, seated himself behind the desk and reached for a whiskey bottle. "'Morning, Jeb," he growled. Stockton nodded, waiting for the usual tirade.

"Them damn fools!" The judge leveled the whiskey in the two glasses until a postage stamp would have floated over the rim. He waved a thin hand, picked up his glass, waited for the constable's nod, then drank. "Them double-damn fools!" he repeated and snapped his cuff back under his sleeve. "Can you beat it? Trying to fight a handkerchief duel!"

"It started with Clay Allison doing it," grunted the constable. "He and another fella, way up on the Brazos. They dug a grave, about eight foot deep, then fought it out with bowie knives."

"Well, they're *not* raising that kind of hell around here!" Judge Barrow's black eyes sparked like jet. "I just gave them both sixty days. What in hell is the matter with kids, nowadays?"

"Don't know generally, Judge," Jeb said. "But this Rebel Cark, who's come into Oreton, is stirring the young ones up. He's a real gunfighter, like Allison and Harden. Doesn't do anything against the law, but there's the feeling that he's wanting to add another killing. Like building his rep."

"Rebel Cark's father's dying," the judge spoke thoughtfully. "Y'know, old Keel Cark opened up this country. Tough as whang leather he is and he raised a tough son. Rebel's been in gunfights all over the southwest and even out in Oregon, they say. He came back to visit and found his father slipping away. A restless man always makes trouble. He's edgy, wants to blow off steam." The judge ducked his white head and peered upward at the lean man facing him.

"Let's cut out the dancing 'round the bush, Judge," Stockton said drily. "Cark's gunning for me. You know that. Hell, everyone knows it! Don't you..."

"Yep, know that, Jeb," the judge interrupted and started pouring another drink. "You better leave town. Tell you what. I'm sending some documents, on Indian lands, to the Governor. You take them to Fort Worth for me?"

Jeb Stockton smiled, the dark blue eyes crinkled into narrow slits of color as he let his chair clump down to its front legs. He reached over to the desk, pawed into a glass bowl, and drew out a couple of postage stamps. "*These*

will get your documents to Fort Worth!"

"Dagnab it all to hell!" The wiry little judge exploded and slammed the glass bowl against the wall. "You can't gunfight—unless someone's breaking the law! You can't run him out'a town for staring at you with fish eyes and, if you tried, he'd draw on you! And there ain't a jury in the whole danged county who'd convict Keel Cark's boy of killing a constable in a fair fight. He ain't done nothing yet, except stare at you every once in a while.

The judge slowed down, "Of course, I've known juries to convict on general principle when the facts, or common knowledge, was such that everyone felt the man was a killer. A drygulcher, or a stabbing fighter hasn't much chance in front of a court, but Cark is one of them fellows with a 'rep.' Never seems to start a fight, just adds a tally to his stick when they're over. Doesn't hold up banks, or rob trains. Just moves around the country meeting trouble when it comes. Maybe helping it along."

JEB STOCKTON shrugged, tipped his hat forward on his thatch of wheat colored hair, hitched his gun belt to a comfortable hang on his leg and walked over to the door leading out

"Where'd you think you're going?" yelled the judge. "*I* said you're taking these documents to the Governor!"

"Judge, Your Honor, *I'm* going down to Willoughby's store. I am going to buy one stick of dynamite and one cap. Then—I'll ram that stick of dynamite into one barrel of a double-barreled shotgun. Then, I'll call this Rebel Cark out and we'll have us a real bloody fandango. I'll give him first shot, telling him of course, about the dynamite. If he guesses wrong, then I'll fire the second barrel. Why, I'll just bet Clay Allison himself never thought of a meaner way to die. If Cark guesses right, I don't think the explosion of the barrel, with the regular shotgun shell, will set off the dynamite. Then he'll kill me, and have another tally to carve.

"Of course, if he pulls the wrong trigger, he's a dead man and I got no more worries about running him out of town. The dynamite will blow him out." The tan face split in a grin as Stockton eased out through the door. An open mouthed Judge Barrow suddenly came to and started pounding both fists on the desk. His curses shook the whiskey bottle and fluttered the curtain on the small window.

The hot morning sun sparkled on the windows of the saloons lining lower Lode Street. Swampers were still emptying the shiny yellow spittoons and sweeping the tobacco-littered sawdust across the boardwalk and into the sandy dust of the street. The *Cattle-Drive Saloon* was the exception. The blare of a piano was accompanied by the clap of hands and the stomp of boots fanned out through the batwings. A dozen horses stirred restlessly in front. Their sweating bodies and foam streaked lips told the constable they had been ridden hard. The KC brand brought a frown to his face. He paused, then shrugged and entered.

It was a triangular room. The bar followed the far back wall and curved halfway around toward the green checkered windows lining the batwings. A beer glass, its fresh foam running onto the stained piano top, danced with the pounding hands of the player. He was standing to give weight to his play. Circling the middle of the room, were six cowboys. Their feet pranced in a ludicrous barn dance being called by a six footer who pounded his whiskey glass against the bar. Other men leaned on their elbows and stomped scarred boots in tune with their clapping hands and whooped as the dancers promenaded.

The noisy tumult halted abruptly as the constable entered. The player gave the piano a final bang and looked

around questioningly as the clumping stopped. He stared at the constable then reached for his beer glass. The green light from the sunlit windows turned his face a mottled blue-yellow as he threw a look at the big man standing at the bar.

Rebel Cark spun his whiskey glass down the wet bar and turned his back. He was built like a wasp. A huge chest rose out of his narrow waist, encircled by a bullet studded gunbelt. His legs seemed to reach for the floor and his short boots caught the drape of yellow pants. The right pants leg was wrinkled from the rawhide cord that looped through a copper eye of his holster.

Jeb Stockton advanced to the bar and caught sight of Bill Galley's bruised face, ducking down behind the wide hat of the man next to him at the bar.

"Go ahead—if it's fun," the officer spoke. "Don't let me stop your patty-cake. Joe!" he raised his voice to the bartender at the far end of the bar. "Pour me a drink—no, better not, if it does *this* to a person." He directed a sardonic wave over the embarrassed dancers. "It just might destroy the dignity of my office, and..."

"Step out and pull your gun!" Bill Galley had jumped to the center of the room as he shouted the command. "There ain't no gunslick constable gonna run down the men from the KC!" The raw welt creasing his cheek turned white under his anger. He crouched with his swollen gun hand inches from the gun butt.

"I don't fight *kids!*", snapped Stockton. He turned his back and threw a sidelong look at Rebel Cark then added. "Not with sixguns."

CARK STRAIGHTENED and, ignoring Galley, moved slowly away from the bar. "You come in here with the idea of makin' trouble," his words were peaked, sharp as the raised edges on a saw. "Well, there just ain't no choice left, we'll have to give it to you. I'll give you a chance to step away from the bar; when you're ready, go for your gun. Galley don't need to horn in for me!"

"I'll do just that," the constable's voice was soft, "but first, I'll say my piece. You're a gunfighter. Those notches on your tally-stick mean that you've downed gunfighters. Now, you figure that if you can down me, you've maybe grown a couple of inches. Bill Galley there, is trying to live in your shadow. He's itching to down me 'cause that'll make him important, maybe as important as you think *you* are. You and your ilk make a vicious circle, going round and round and leaving dead men in the center. I have no way out. If I don't call your bluff, then I can't enforce the law, because..."

"Aw, dry up!" The words shot from Bill Galley. "We ain't interested in any sermon. Go for your gun, or get outa this barroom. Or—" he minced toward Jeb— "Maybe I'll just take it away from you."

"Hold it, Galley!" rasped Cark. "Don't act like more'n a kid than you are; Stockton'd kill you before you ever got holt of your gun!"

"That's just *your* thinkin'," shouted Galley. "If he's got you bluffed, then get outa my way. I owe him somethin'."

Rebel's Cark's face darkened in angry frustration. The situation was getting out of hand. He felt he had Stockton sweated into a stand-off and now Galley wanted to perform. If he turned away from the fight now, the news of his cowardice would be broadcast and he wouldn't be able to wear his tarnished pride. Galley had already insulted this by ordering him out of the way. Rebel Cark knew it was time for action but couldn't decide which action to take. The cowboys were shuffling their feet and the tenseness deepened. Why, Rebel wondered, didn't Stockton say something? Why didn't he go for his gun, instead of just lean-

ing against the bar with a grin creasing his thin lips?

The blanketed roll of hoofs pounded into the dead silence of the tense room. All eyes turned to the doors as they heard a galloping man dismount and hurry across the walk. He banged through the batwings and stared into the dim light until he recognized Rebel Cark. "The old man's dead, Rebel." He stepped briskly forward. "I was sent to tell you so's you could come right back to the ranch."

He raised the peak of his hat and stepped past Galley to the bar. "Joe, give me a quick one 'fore we go." Mechanically, the barkeep reached for a bottle and toppled a shot glass onto the bar.

"We'll—hold this off." Cark got the words out stiffly.

"Yeah," grunted Stockton and turned to the bar. "I'll have that drink now."

AS THE men moved out, Bill Galley turned in the doorway and sent threatening words toward the bent back of the constable. "I ain't takin' anythin' offa you, Stockton!"

"Is that gun loaded?" Jeb Stockton asked softly.

"You're dam' right it's loaded!" Galley shouted.

"Well, then—" With a whipping flick of the trained gunman, the constable's revolver jumped into his hand and the roar echoed through the room, blowing gunsmoke into a crazy circle in the shaft of sunlight. The hot slug tore into the holster of the youth. It whanged against the iron and ricocheted off to plunk softly into the wood beside the piano. "That'll take care of that." Stockton said.

Galley had been wrenched around. He stumbled against the batwings, lost his balance, and rolled onto the sidewalk. He rose to be met by the muzzle of the constable's still smoking weapon. "Get on your horse and go along." His tone became scolding. "Bill, *don't* try it again—that grandstand stuff doesn't get by. Go away someplace, far off, and grow up."

White faced, Bill Galley climbed into his saddle and trotted down the dusty street. The KC cowboys waited for Rebel Cark then raced out of town. The stiff back of Cark left no doubt in Stockton's mind that he'd see the gunman again and that his problem would be settled only by the bark of sixguns.

THE WEEK that succeeded the row in the *Cattle-Drive Saloon* found the constable busy. Judge Barrows sent him out to the Salt Ridge Mountains to bring in a berserk halfbreed, who had murdered his children by banging their heads against the cabin wall. Upon Stockton's return with the body, the judge hurried him down into the south, to check the report of cattle being driven into Mexico by the guerilla army of General Juan Jailisco.

Out on the KC ranch, old Keel Cark was buried with a huge number of relatives gathered around the grave under the cottonwoods that looked south to the old Louisiana Trail. The ceremonies over, his relatives stayed around for a few days, then wandered back to their own spreads. Cark's long-jointed kin knew of the trouble between the constable and Rebel, but phlegmatically turned away from the subject. They were secretly proud of Rebel's gunfighting reputation, but had no desire to mix into a private argument. This Texas clan would unite, storm and thunder across the land, if one of their group was treated unjustly, but a man who made his own trouble, walked alone.

The citizens of Oreton began to anticipate the settlement of the grudge between Rebel Cark and Jeb Stockton. Report drifted in that Bill Galley was riding a horse-hunting crew and exploding plenty of ammunition among the peaks of the high plateaus rising in the blue haze of the mountains. The cauldron of trouble was brewing rap-

idly and the spittles of hate and fear spluttered near the surface.

Judge Barrows scratched deep, seeking ways to keep his constable in the hinterlands of Rocky County but finally ran out of orders. The set of circumstances that evolved with Rebel Cark's homecoming, had woven a web that could be stretched but would never lose its shape. He knew the proud character of his constable that burned with resentment over the judge's protective measures. He knew that Rebel was making his fight talk throughout the saloons. The citizens would soon start muttering that perhaps Jeb Stockton was liking his long trips. That facing halfbreeds and checking cattle rustling might be a lot safer than facing a real gunman.

Barrows called his constable into the office. They stared at each other across his desk. "Rebel Cark will be in town tonight, Jeb." Barrows spoke calmly. "Make it a fair fight, even bend backwards a little so's things'll come out clean. There are no twelve Texas men," his voice gathered volume, "who'll ever bring in a verdict of guilty in an honest gunfight. Violence seems to breed violence on these wide plains. We'll have men like Harden, like Cark, forever. But, we'll also have men like the Earps—and the S t o c k t o n s—to counterbalance the scales.

"Wrong or right, it's the belief of our citizens, that man must face man over the smoke of roaring sixguns, or be called cowards. This's a sorry thing, but there it is. You just let him call *you* out this time, eh?"

"Sure," Jeb Stockton rose from his chair and slipped out of the room.

IT WAS A seven block walk from the office of the *Cattle-Drive Saloon*. Jeb Stockton had made the patrol a thousand times, in keeping the peace. Now, he made the walk to start trouble. He had the feeling that another Jeb Stockton was pacing him behind the buildings, step for step, in the dark alley. He pushed his hat back and paused at each corner, throwing swift glances into the shadows of the cross streets. A vagrant thought kept time with his steps. Would he stride back down these streets or, would he be carried? He shook his head and concentrated on the blob of yellow light that seeped through the batwings to mingle with the green haze of the *Cattle-Drive's* painted windows.

Before he realized he had covered the distance, he stood in front of the saloon. Stockton crossed the street, keeping to the edge of the darkness until he reached the boardwalk, then slapped the batwings with his left hand and was inside.

Rebel Cark loomed up like a giant among the drinkers at the curved bar. The silver buttons on his cowhide vest twinkled coldly in the warm room. His yellow eyelids dropped, covering the pinpoints of his agate cold eyes.

"Clear the room." Stockton's voice was low, but carried to every man in the room. Several of the KC cowboys hitched their shoulders and threw a

look at Rebel Cark. He stared for a long moment at the constable. His face twitched, then he nodded to the cowboys. "The man's tellin' you to leave—so you better leave."

Stockton moved around a green topped poker table and reached for a stack of blue chips. He let them run through the pyramided fingers of his left hand as the men filed out and clumped around on the boardwalk. The room seemed to swell as it emptied. Cark and Stockton were a good thirty feet apart. A table, with several tipped chairs, stood in lonely isolation between the men. Cark's elbows lifted from the bar and he moved several slow steps into the room. Stockton stacked the chips on the cloth and moved away from behind the table.

"You're standin' right in front of that lamp—" Cark's words were steady. "Its reflector is in my eyes."

"I'll move out," Stockton said, and shifted forward and to the right. "That better?"

Cark smiled. A lifting of his mouth over sharp teeth, then nodded.

Stockton spoke. "Let me ask you a question, first. Have you seen Bill Galley?"

The yellow eyelids folded slowly, until the eyes became a slit. "No. Why?"

"Why?" Because that makes you a damned liar!" Stockton's voice was still low, but the words carried the whipping hiss of a striking snake.

With a leer, Cark nodded and boldly directed a glance at the service window behind the bar. A rifle muzzle poked its snoot into the room. Almost immediately, it blasted. Stockton felt his head swell with the roar of the explosion. His feet had moved with the click of the hammer. The slug that entered his side, helped his twisting dive under the table. He heard the rifle snick another shell into the chamber and, before the echo of the first shot died, Stockton had thrown a snapshot at the opening. Cark's feet moved and Stockton knew the gunman was easing around to get a sure shot at his body only partially concealed by the table.

"Hold your fire!" Stockton let terror ride his voice. He threw his sixgun out into the open space of the floor. The rifle roared with his words and the leg of a chair tore loose and slipped away. Splinters ripped across his tight back. He heard Cark's laugh and watched the yellow boots come closer. The sixgun was kicked aside and banged against the molding of the wall. Another click from the service window and a shot roared out and the slug bit into the sawdust floor just in front of his face. Stockton was thankful that the high window prevented the rifleman from drawing a bead on his position under the table. With a sweating hand, he reached into his waistband and withdrew a second gun from beneath the black shirt. He cocked the hammer and waited.

"Throw another slug in higher!" Cark's voice was excited.

BILL GALLEY'S face appeared in the slot as his eye squinted along the rifle barrel. His face was red and filled the window. Coolly, Stockton snapped a shot into the opening, then watched Galley's face disappear in a reddening blur. The black rifle barrel slid forward and began to drop.

Stockton lurched to his feet and the table slammed completely over and scattered the chairs. He faced the startled Cark and calmly pulled the trigger. Cark was caught with his gun pointed toward the floor. His narrow waist took the slug from Stockton's gun. Cark's body bent and he made a tired effort to fire, then he straightened and plunged forward.

Men streamed back into the smoke filled bar room. They stared at the limp body of Rebel Cark. A cowboy shucked his leather coat and dropped it gently over the staring, surprised face. He reached down and pried the fingers from the cold gun and spun the cylin-

der. There was awe in his voice when he spoke. "Never got to fire a shot!"

"He was leaving that to Bill Galley," growled Stockton. "You think I shot myself, you damned fool?" The constable clawed at the soaked shirt over his wounded side. "He had Bill Galley holed up behind the service bar with a rifle. His angle was bad and," the constable patted his concealed weapon, "they never thought about *this* gut-shooter."

"Them rifle shots was fired by Galley?" questioned the barkeep. "We figured *you* had come in with a rifle strapped over your back or somethin'. You walked stiff-like and moved over with your back to the wall."

"Don't horse me!" Stockton's words were edged. "You've been hiding Galley out behind that wall for some time. He'd leave off that horse hunting outfit every night then slip in there while Rebel Cark'd shoot off his mouth out here in the bar. They knew I'd have to come in and take him, or get out of town. While I was supposed to be down on the border, I was up in the mountains and followed him into town a couple of times. I *saw* you let him in the back way."

"Cark put me up to it," the bartender whinned. "But..."

"Don't whine, just leave town before the judge figures some way to yank you into jail." Stockton continued his explanation to the others. "Cark was the smart one. Galley would get hung for my murder—that's why Cark held his fire, figuring that Galley'd finally get a killing shot in. That'd leave Cark with a full gun and Galley with a hot rifle. Nobody'd take Galley's word over his. Now, clear out them bodies. Them Carks ought to bury this one face down, so's he'll meet the devil face to face!"

Jeb Stockton spun on his heel, strode to the door, and started down the seven long blocks to the courthouse.

★

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It wasn't that Doorn was being shot at although he was a stranger to Bent Horn and the surrounding territory—it was that each time the drygulcher's bullet came a little closer to the target. Doorn figured that pretty soon, the bushwhacker would stop missing!

AMBUSH AT BENT HORN

CALEB DOORN NOVELET

by Lauran Paine

DOORN WAS riding down the ravine arroyo in the damp shadows of early afternoon, looking anxiously ahead, wondering if he would get out onto the plains below or have to re-trace his trail and ride overland to the hamlet of Bent Horn, when the first shot rang out clarion clear in the thin, shimmering air. Instinct drove him off the horse and into the boulders of the canyon. Nothing moved except the black horse and it didn't trot far before the alarm passed. It was too hot for exertion, even fright-inspired, to last long.

Caleb Doorn's deep-set blue eyes studied the scrub-brush and boulder strewn little canyon. It was a perfect place for an ambush; but he was a stranger in the Bent Horn country, too, so there couldn't be much reason to kill him—much personal reason, anyway.

He let his .44 barrel droop as he speculated. The arroyo was a desolate, wild place with little value to cattle and none to humans. He frowned. Being useless, maybe that was why it was inhabited, and, being inhabited and useless both, it must be a hideout. Reasoning this way, Caleb concluded that the bushwhacker just about had to be an

Dan and Bess saw that Doorn had been hit...

outlaw. He risked raising his hat on a stick. It was an old trick and drew no fire. He lay prone in the blasting sunlight and raked the territory with squinted eyes. There was no movement visible. Annoyed and restless, he wormed forward, braced for a duel that never started, then cursed and arose, brushed talis and sand off his fringed shirt and faded cloth pants, sidled toward the black horse and caught him easily. Keeping the animal between his body and the far side of the ravine, Doorn retraced his steps until he was safely away; then he swung up and took the ridge trails toward Bent Horn.

THE TOWN was drowsy and listless under the fierce summer heat. Doorn swung down at the liverybarn, gave the reins over to an old man with badly healed broken legs that made him sidle when he walked, and went across the dusty roadway to the *Night Owl Saloon.*

"Beer, stranger?" Doorn nodded, accepted the tepid brew, and sipped it. He and the bartender were alone in the

old building except for a dying game of pinochle over in one corner, where four old men played for pension stakes. Caleb liked the shape of the barman's hard jaw and square eyes.

"You know this country pretty well?"

The man nodded shortly. "Ought to. Born and raised here."

"Well—you know a canyon about six miles northwest of town that's full of boulders, with a dry creek bed through it and with more brush than the rest of the country around?"

"Sounds like Diablo Canyon. Got a sign at the lower end sayin' *'No Trespassing'* with a burnt brand of a wagonwheel on it?"

"I never got to the lower end of it; didn't see the sign."

"Oh." The bartender's eyes quickened with interest. He sensed something. "Got turned back—maybe?"

"No 'maybe', amigo. I got turned back quick; someone took a shot at me."

"The hell." The muscles along the blunt jaw rippled slightly. "See him?"

"Nope. Just one shot. He must have left before I did."

The man nodded and let his eyes drift away, past Doorn, with a sort of introspective look, and said nothing.

Doorn finished the beer and wiped his mouth on the fringed sleeve of his buckskin shirt. There was a shell-belt around his middle that held both a worn .44 and a Kiowa-Apache knife in a beaded sheath.

"That private land, up that canyon?"

"Well—no. Not exactly. It's open-range, but the Wagonwheel's always used it for driving their stock from the range to their fenced land."

"Then it must've been Wagonwheel who shot at me; sort of a warning, maybe."

"Maybe."

Caleb felt the man's reticence growing by the briefness of his answers. He understood. It was simply frontier prudence—and also a form of life insurance. He flipped a bit on the bar top and shrugged.

"I'm warned, then, but it seems like a sign at the upper end of the canyon would be a lot cheaper than keeping guards out there to run folks off. Especially since no one ever uses that canyon, from the looks of the ground."

The barman flashed him a quick look and nodded. "Yeah. I reckon; well, got to clean up a little," he said, and moved off to break the conversation. Doorn watched him with puzzled eyes, then shrugged and went outside onto the duckboards. He found a warped old buggy seat bolted to the side of the building next to the *Night Owl,* sank down onto it and watched Bent Horn's lethargy under the scalding sunlight, and listened contentedly to the sound of a blacksmith, somewhere, banging away on his anvil.

THE DROWSINESS of the village overcame Doorn, but his mind kept picking at the Diablo Canyon episode. If, as the barman had said, the canyon was used as a chute for driving Wagonwheel cattle back and forth, why wasn't there any recent sign of stock being pushed through it? Also, why just *one* shot at him? He thumbed his hat back methodically, and started a cigaret.

The sound of a buggy rattling into Bent Horn from the north made him hesitate and look up. The vehicle swung in across the roadway from him and a girl jumped down, flipped the lines around the brake and tied the team to a sagging rack. What held Caleb's attention was the burned scar of a Wagonwheel brand gouged deeply into the sideboards of the buggy. Doorn finished the cigaret, lit and inhaled as the girl crossed the roadway, coming toward him. She was pretty in an arrogant, condescending way. Even at that distance Caleb could read the superiority that was bred in her. He smiled to himself and let the smoke eddy up

past his narrowed, thoughtful eyes. The girl went past him without a glance and entered a general store a little north of where he sat. He admired the free gait and youthful firmness of her figure.

Arising lazily, Caleb followed her. The small music of his spurs was pleasant in the furnace like silence.

"Cart'll be in tonight, Will. He'll settle the bill with you."

Doorn heard that much as the girl handed a balding, blond giant of a man a list. The merchant nodded at her with an intimate smile. "All right, Bess. Is Dan well enough so's I could come out visiting tonight?"

Doorn watched the girl and thought he saw a hesitant disapproval in the depths of her eyes. But it was too brief to be sure. She nodded. "Yes. Dad's a lot better. He's tough, Will; the bullet nicked a corner of his lung. Doc Whett said, but Dad's already up and around."

Doorn pondered this as the merchant nodded. "I'll be out about seven, then, Bess."

She nodded. "And the list, Will?"

"Have it put in your buckboard as soon as Clint has it boxed up."

Caleb watched the girl leave. This time he caught her glance, saw the surprise in it and knew strangers were a novelty in Bent Horn. He was still looking after her, putting small pieces of his private puzzle together, when the storekeeper spoke.

"Something?"

Doorn went over and leaned his buckles against the counter that separated them. They were of a size, but the balding, blond man was heavier, with the paleness of a man much indoors. Their eyes were the same faded, speculative blue, though. Caleb nodded. "Box of .44 shells."

Will brought them from the gun shelf and looked down as Caleb spun a 'dobe dollar toward him. "Going hunting?"

Caleb almost laughed. "Not exactly. Already been; need more shells." Their eyes held again and Doorn asked a question. "Who shot Wagonwheel's boss?"

Will made a sardonic face. "We'd all like to know that, stranger. You interested?"

"Not especially. Only it seems to me Bent Horn's got gun-happy citizens."

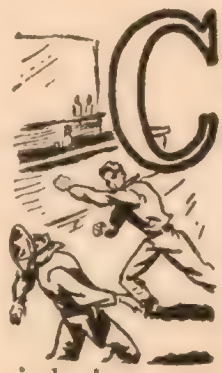
"You too?"

Caleb shrugged. "Lousy shots, from the sound of things. Where did he get it?"

"Dan Cartwright? Oh, some damned canyon near his range. I'm not plumb clear just where it did happen.

Caleb casually punched the shells into his shell-belt without speaking, nodded and walked out. He knew her name, and Wagonwheel's owner's name too. Bess Cartwright and Dan Cartwright, and he also knew she had a brother and his name was Cart Cartwright. Also, unless he was 'way off, he knew what canyon the Wagonwheel owner had been drygulched in. Frowning a little, he crossed to the livery-barn, got his horse, swung up and headed back north out of Bent Horn. He didn't look back and therefore didn't see Will standing in the doorway of his mercantile establishment watching him go, nor did he see the barman at the *Night Owl,* looking over at Will.

- 2 -



CALEB RODE leisurely back over the trace that had brought him down out of the foothills to Bent Horn, on the plains, but where the ruts to Wagonwheel veered off, so did he. There was no particular plan in his mind—just a natural curiosity to know by whom, and why, he had been shot at.

The Wagonwheel was an old ranch by the looks of the buildings. Neat and

orderly, they were bleached and warped with age. The main house nestled in a grove of Digger pines and a flowering rose of great proportions wandered profusely over the low veranda rail. Caleb swung down before the house, nodded to the youngish, hard eyed man with two guns who came down off the veranda toward him, and stood hipshot in the sunlight, waiting for the other man to speak.

"Howdy."

"Howdy. My name's Doorn. Wondered if Wagonwheel was hiring any riders."

The cowboy's eyes, an odd green color in contrast to his ebony hair, pinpointed Caleb for several seconds before he answered. "No; not right now. Later on, when we start Fall round up, maybe." The green eyes went over the fringed shirt and powerful shoulders beneath. "Who sent you out here?"

"No one; just riding around."

"Yeah?" There was a sudden, quick suspicion in the lined, cold face.

Caleb nodded. "Yeah," he said.

They were standing that way when the house door opened. Caleb was getting ready to turn back to his horse when the girl's voice interrupted the action.

"Cart?"

The two-gun man answered without looking away. "Yeah?"

Caleb could see the indecision in her eyes and surmised what she wanted to say. He smiled past young Cartwright's shoulder and nodded his head slightly. She recognized him; he knew that, too. "Well— Bess—what you want?"

When she still didn't answer, Caleb made a slight face and looked sardonically at the gunman. "I reckon she wants to tell you she saw me in Bent Horn."

"You a stranger here?" Caleb nodded. "Been in the country long?"

Caleb shook his head. "Not that long, Cartwright."

"What do you mean?"

"What you're thinking. Not long enough to drygulch your paw."

Cartwright's face filled slowly with blood. He wasn't a patient or tolerant man, and it stuck out all over him. "How'd you know he was drygulched then?"

"Heard it in Bent Horn." Caleb turned and toed into the stirrup. I reckon your sister there, wants to tell you she saw me in town today. In the Emporium." He swung up easily, sat still, looking down at them waiting. Cartwright ignored the last remark. There was an awkward silence, then Doorn nooded and reined around. "See you in the Fall—maybe."

BESS CAME down the walk and stood beside her brother. In silence they watched the stranger ride away. Cart's eyes were curious. Both brother and sister had green eyes, but hers weren't hidden in the little puffs of protective flesh, like Cart's were. She started to turn away when a single gunshot split the stillness. Cart started violently and swore; then he was running across the yard toward the distant black horse, standing head down in surprise, over the sprawled man in fringed buckskin. Bess stifled the cry in her throat with an effort, turned as the door to the house opened, and stared up at her father. Old Dan was standing there, a burly .45-.70 carbine cocked and hanging easy in his thick hands, squinting past her at the fallen stranger and Cart, who was panting as he knelt and glared at Caleb. Bess was gripped by more than fright until her father spoke.

"Get in the house, Bess."

Cart scanned the hills. There were a thousand places a drygulcher could hide. He shrugged his contempt and looked into the angry blue eyes staring up at him. "Hit hard, stranger?"

"No. Was reaching for my tobacco sack. Damned bullet fairly knocked me loose though." Cart saw the gush of

blood then. Doorn's left arm, below the elbow, was a torn welter of gore. He nodded at the shredded flesh. "Goddamn big caliber gun."

Doorn didn't answer, instead he fished out a handkerchief and handed it to Cartwright. The two-gun man made a twisted tourniquet and racked it up as tight as massive arms would make it. Doorn got back to his feet. There was a wryness to his glance. Cart noticed it and understood even before Caleb spoke. "Second time. This time it was damned close. Trying for a chest shot."

"He's not fooling—whoever he is."

Caleb's eyes swung over to Cart. "Any ideas?"

"No. Not a damned one. Dan—that's my paw—got it about two miles above the ranch. Same thing; chest shot."

"Why?"

"Gawd! *I* don't know." Cart started to take the reins of Caleb's black horse. "Come on back to the house. Bess'll patch it up."

Caleb shook his head, pulled the reins loose and swung up with gritted teeth. "Thanks. I'll go to town." He turned abruptly without another word and rode back the way he had come. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere on the range as he rode. The land was still and dead under the last fiery rays of the angry sun, and so it went all the way back to Bent Horn.

CALEB FOUND the doctor easily enough. He was a garrulous ex-Army surgeon. Ronald Whett was his name. He pursed his lips at sight of the mangled flesh and motioned for Caleb to sit down.

"It'll hurt." He went to work and never looked up. Pain was his trade and patching his profession. If it was necessary to increase one to achieve the other, then he increased it. That's all there was to it. Caleb felt the clammy sweat running down his back and several times the room swayed oddly.

Whett was bland enough. "How'd it happen?"

"Drygulcher out at Wagonwheel."

"The hell! Another one. Old Dan—"

"I know."

"Oh—what d'ya reckon's behind it?"

"Haven't any idea, I'm a stranger here."

"Maybe."

Doorn looked at the man, who ignored the look as he worked. "What do you mean, 'maybe'?"

"I know you. You're Caleb Doorn. I was at Santa Fe when you were court-martialed for disobedience during the Apache campaign." There was an awkward silence; Doorn didn't speak.

Whett was finishing up. "You going to stay around Bent Horn, Doorn?"

"Now—yes. This time I'm going to get nosy."

"Oh—this is the second try?"

"Yeah; first one was a clean miss. Up some damned canyon behind Cartwheel."

"That'll be Diablo Canyon. Old rustler's hangout years back."

"You know a lot, Doctor. What d'you think it's all about?"

"Can't say, Captain."

"Ideas?"

"Just one, and it wouldn't be worth a damned thing if I got shot over talking about it."

"It'll go no farther; you have my word."

Whett bandaged the burning, aching arm, walked out of the room without looking up, washed and came back with two glasses and a half empty bottle. He handed Caleb a drink, then their eyes met. There was humor, sardonic and wry, in the doctor's glance. "I'm no gambler, Doorn."

"This is no gamble. Besides, which d'you want on your conscience—dead men who didn't have a chance, or a drygulcher you'll always wonder about?"

Doctor Whett downed his shot,

poured two more and drank them neat, coughed and dabbed at his eyes before he spoke. "You know a man named Will Guiness?"

"Don't know him, no—but I reckon know who he is."

"Well—he came to Bent Horn shortly after the war and opened his store. Made a lot of money and is making more. He's been courting Bess Cartwright. That's all I know about him."

"Why the suspicions, then?"

"Here, you need another one. It's like this. About two weeks ago I buggied over to an In'yun encampment to deliver a kid. It was coming out wrong. Didn't start for home until about midnight. Just short of Wagonwheel I ran across three riders. I pulled up and watched them. Don't ask me why, but I did. Night-riders can be friends—or enemies; at night I don't care to meet either. One of those men was Will Guiness. I recognized him. He gave the other two men some money, then turned and loped back toward Bent Horn."

Whett drank another one, neat, and nodded his head at Caleb. "Nothing there, really, that couldn't be entirely aboveboard, except the hour, and the fact that the two strangers had a string of pack mules somewhere over toward Diablo Canyon."

"How do you know that?"

"I sat still and watched them go back toward the arroyo, then, in a little while they lined out pack animals and headed up into the Stronghold."

"Apache Stronghold?"

"Yes."

Doorn poured himself another jolt, downed it and arose. A rush of dizziness swept over him. "All right, Doctor. Thanks." He picked up his hat and dumped it onto his head. "What do I owe you?"

"Five dollars for the surgery. A headstone if you give me away."

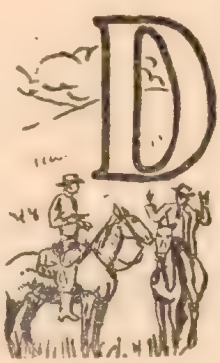
Doorn paid the five dollars and grinned crookedly. "You won't get the headstone—not from me, anyway."

"You going to call him?"

"Nope. Just watch him."

Whett went with his patient toward the door, stood in the opening and stared speculatively over the little village in its nocturnal robe of soft, dark velvet. "Be careful of him, Doorn."

- 3 -



DOORN ATE hurriedly at a Mexican cafe, went up to the liverybarn, saddled up and rode due west of town until he found a wiry clutch of scrub-oak, and lay down in the pleasant coolness of the night, waiting. If, as he had learned in the store, Cart went in to Bent Horn to see Guiness like Bess had said; and if Will rode out to Wagonwheel as he'd told the girl he would, one or the other of them would pass close to where Doorn was resting. While he didn't care much about seeing young Cartwright, he was definitely interested in Guiness.

The land gave out a hot, pungent odor that was prairie fragrance. Caleb breathed deeply and thought of many things. Of his court martial at Santa Fe three years before; of Diablo Canyon, which was little more than a boulder strewn arroyo; and of Will Guiness courting Bess Cartwright. With that thought he sat upright. A knife-edged hunch had sliced into his reverie. If Cuiness was up to something illegal out around Wagonwheel, it was natural he should try to get the ranch in order to assure his future in whatever he was up to.

But, just marrying Bess wouldn't eliminate her brother; so long as Cart was around, Guiness wouldn't get the ranch outright. Someone had already tried to eliminate the present owner of Wagonwheel. Caleb cursed and got up. He couldn't wait now. Guiness had a

golden opportunity tonight, if Caleb's hunch was right; he'd meet young Cartwright alone in the darkness. One shot and a fast horse. Then, later, visiting the survivors at Wagonwheel, where he would be expected and welcomed without suspicion, another shot—maybe two!—and Wagonwheel was either his or no one's.

Caleb swung up with a grunt, cradled the wounded arm inside his shirt, and urged the black horse into a long-legged walk toward Wagonwheel. He turned the idea over in his mind as he rode. In some ways it wouldn't hold water, but those were details. Will Guiness was a clever man; Caleb knew that instinctively. Details wouldn't bother him.

Reining up at an erosion wash, squinting for a crossing, Caleb heard a horse coming from the direction of Wagonwheel. The animal was above him—to the north. He dismounted quickly and stood at his horse's head, listening. There was a soft jingle of rein-chains, but the darkness and sickle moon hid the rider. When the sound had faded toward Bent Horn, Caleb swung back up, reined around and followed. He was sure the night-rider was Cart. That meant—if his hunch was right—that Guiness would be coming down the range toward Bess' brother, and possibly murder was riding the Wagonwheel range. His right hand tightened on the reins and a picture of Bess' face flashed in his mind's eye. She was a beautiful girl, in spite—or maybe because of—her arrogant, superior look.

But Caleb was wrong, fatally wrong. Cart rode ahead of him almost to the very lights of town, and there was no sign of Guiness. He reined up and listened to the jingling rein-chains go on to Bent Horn. He frowned to himself and stared after the Cartwright two-gun man. By rights Guiness should have killed him, or at least have tried to, because it could have been done easily enough in the darkness. Pondering, Caleb swung back and rode again toward Wagonwheel. He was lost in his thoughts and over the little erosion ravine where he had first picked up the sound of Cartwright, only a long rifle-shot from Wagonwheel, when he heard another rider coming toward him from the direction of the ranch.

Doorn reined frantically away because this newcomer was riding hard, and directly toward him. He was twisted backwards, watching to see whether he would be discovered or not, when the first shot rang out and slammed flatly into the gloom with a tell-tale orange tongue. The bullet was close and the black horse bunched under him. Angry, Caleb flashed two snap shots, drew one more shot, reined up and listened, heard nothing and knew the gunman was listening for his movements also.

PUZZLED, Doorn left his horse in some reeds along the gravely sump of another wash and stole back over the land, looking for his attacker. He lay flat and skylined the range, but there wasn't any silhouette. He was pushing himself upwards when another shot, a rifle this time, banged into the night, this time behind him. Rolling swiftly Caleb looked for the lick of flame. He was fearful then, too. It wasn't a case of mistaken identity as he had thought, at first; there were two of them, one behind him and one in front. It was very clearly a well planned job of ambushing him.

He crouched low and sprinted toward his horse. The rifle crashed again. He went sprawling, feeling pain in his ankle and violently angry. The fall made his wounded arm feel warm and sticky under its bandage. He grunted when an exploratory hand indicated the heel had been shot off his left boot. Squint-eyed he lay still and looked for the rifleman. There was nothing but blackness. Fuming, he wormed forward inch by inch, got fairly close to the black horse and lay back, murderously angry and waiting.

It took almost two hours. The moon was past the meridian when Caleb heard a rider coming toward him slowly, very slowly. He smiled wolfishly, eased back the hammer and pushed up a little. The sound of steel striking stone placed the man for him. He raised the gun, breathed deeply and watched for the silhouette that loomed up suddenly, leaning forward in the saddle, looking at the ground. His finger tightened and the night blew apart again in gun-thunder. The horse snorted violently and went sideways; the rider went off sideways and backwards like a sack of grain.

Then the rifleman began a systematic pumping of lead. He, too, had come closer during the wait. Caleb rolled frantically, crazily, to get away. The night became alive with bullets searching blindly for him. Then he lay still in a small depression of gravel and shook his head; he had been all wrong, someway.

The rifleman stopped firing. Caleb lay flat and skylined the horizon for him. Somewhere a horse was running, but Caleb wasn't interested; he tossed several small rocks where he figured the drygulcher should be, drew no fire and hadn't really expected to; then he fired once and flattened. Immediately the rifle spoke and dust flew up to his right. He had it then; the .44 bucked hard against his thumb pad until it was empty. No fire came back.

Caleb re-loaded and lay back. An hour went by, then two more. He pushed himself out of the graveley depression and wormed forward, caught the horse of the dead gunman and, using it as a shield, walked it toward the last rifle shot.

The man was dead with a gaping hole in the chest, and another in the side of his neck. Caleb rolled him over, studied the swarthy features and frowned as he arose, left the horse and stalked back to the other one, looked at him and swore. The swarthy man, evidently a 'breed, was a stranger to him, but the first man was known all right, although he didn't know his name. It was the day bartender from the *Night Owl* saloon; the man he had talked to earlier in the afternoon.

That made matters a little more understandable, then. Doorn had aroused the barman's interest. He had been trailed out of Bent Horn; word had been sent ahead to the 'breed so that the intended victim would be caught between the pair of them.

Caleb rolled and lit a cigaret, using the dead barman's hat as a shield for the match. He smoked slowly. The hunch still held then, only Guiness had had to change his plans; he didn't dare risk drygulching young Cartwright with Doorn known to be out on the range somewhere. In fact, Guiness hadn't dared ride to the Wagonwheel, either —not with Caleb loose. He went back, caught the black horse, swung up and rode west again, toward the Wagonwheel. He knew someone would have heard the gunfire and a word of warning might yet save a life—or maybe three lives.

BESS WAS sitting on the veranda, a carbine in her lap, when he rode up. There wasn't a light anywhere on the ranch. Caleb grinned crookedly as he swung down and went up onto the porch. The girl's face was an ashen smudge of big eyed wonder. He nodded. "Where's your dad?"

"Why?"

"Thought I'd better tell him there's a couple of dead men out there." He waved his good arm back the way he had come.

Bess nodded weakly. "He's—over by the barn. We heard the firing. Were they—was it you they were shooting at?"

"Yes'm."

"Who were they?"

Caleb sank down in a cane bottomed chair beside her. "One's the barman from the *Night Owl,* over in Bent

Horn; other one's a stranger to me—'breed, by the look of him."

Caleb watched the bulky figure approaching them stealthily as he talked to Bess. He recognized it as Dan Cartwright but gave no sign he had seen the man. "Bess—that's right, isn't it?" She nodded at him. "Where's your company?"

"What company?"

"Didn't I hear Will Guiness say he'd be out about seven this evening, when I was in the store today?"

"Oh—yes. He didn't show up. Anyway, Cart went in to see him. They probably got to talking; they're good friends."

Caleb hid his surprise by arising and offering his hand to Dan and introducing himself. The rancher propped the Springfield .45-.70 against the wall and studied Caleb as the latter told of the attack made on him. He nodded slowly, never blinking his hard eyes. "We heard it. What you doing, riding around out here at night, in the first place?"

Caleb shrugged. "Looking for the man who shot me today."

"You reckon it was one of them fellers, then?"

"Don't know." He got up. A suspicion was forming in his head and the present company made him ashamed of it. "I'll head back now; reckon it's all over."

Dan Cartwright nodded and sighed. "Damn! Can't figure it all out." He shook his head again. "You send the sheriff out for them bodies, will you?"

Caleb nodded and looked down at the girl. She was standing now, her head even with his shoulder. The arrogant look was gone, but the superiority was still there. He knew then, it was part of the good breeding of her—the quality, not the disposition. He smiled.

"Bess?"

"Yes?"

"Guiness didn't keep his date. Could I come out tomorrow night at the same time he was supposed to?"

She blushed a little but he couldn't see it. They were standing close, looking at each other. Old Dan was too surprised to say anything, then she nodded. "Yes—for dinner."

Caleb turned away with a smile, nodded to Dan and walked down to his horse. The words floated back softly, to her. "Thanks ma'm," he said.

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IT WAS breaking dawn when Caleb stepped down stiffly and handed the black's reins to a drowsy hostler, blinked at what felt like fine emory paper glazed over his eyeballs and walked down the deserted duckboards, with a hollow, eerie sound, to Doctor Whett's place. Bent Horn was wringing the last breath of coolness out of the pre-day before the sun scorched the world again. Whett opened the door with resignation, blinked at Doorn, stepped back and motioned him inside. The doctor was dressed, freshly shaven and well rested looking. There was a pleasant odor of coffee in his combination bachelor residence and office. In contrast, Caleb looked filthy and very, very old; his face was grey from sleeplessness and the shock that went with his injured arm.

"I can tell you, Doorn. You didn't see him."

Caleb followed the retreating figure into a spotless kitchen, accepted a thick mug of black coffee and nodded. "Right. But that's not what I came to ask you." He sipped the coffee, blew on it and took two large swallows. "Those two men you saw Guiness talking to; were they 'breeds, would you say?"

"One of them was. Sit down." Caleb obeyed. Whett felt the fever in the arm and cursed in a level drawl. "Got

it all busted open again, you damned fool."

"One was a 'breed. Good. Was the other one at all familiar to you?"

Whett got a basin of hot water and pulled up a chair. He went to work on the throbbing arm with a shake of his head. "No; can't say he was."

"All right. That's all I had to say. Now; how did you know I didn't see Guiness last night?"

"Because he and young Cartwright were at the store for a while; then they went to the *Night Owl;* then, later, they saddled up and rode due north out of town."

Caleb winced once, saw the mess of swollen flesh and looked away quickly. He was weaker than he thought; it was bone-weariness and loss of blood. "You don't miss much, do you?"

Whett shrugged. "Not now. Not after telling you about Guiness. I want to be around to patch up again. I committed myself to a part of this mess when I told you about Will. I'll keep a weather eye peeled until the shooting's over, now, believe me."

"Where did they go? You know that?" It was a blind hope and Caleb wasn't surprised when Whett shook his head. They didn't speak again until the new bandage was in place, then the doctor got up, studied his guest, jerked his head toward a closed door and grunted. "In there. Go on. I'll waken you this afternoon."

Caleb went into the little room, grimaced at the strong odor of carbolic acid, lay down and played dead until Doctor Whett roused him shortly after noon. He felt one-hundred percent better. Whett fed him, then he left the little house with a promise to keep the medical man informed.

BENT HORN was wrapped in its usual apathy when Caleb went into the sheriff's office, reported the dead bodies and exchanged stares with the lean, cadaverous deputy who was slouched back in the absent sheriff's chair. There was a desultory buzzing from a blue-tailed fly that sounded loud, until the deputy spoke. "Who are you?"

"Name's Doorn. Caleb Doorn."

Again the silence. It was obvious the deputy had heard the name. He nodded thoughtfully. "One's Cliff Bowman, y'say?"

"If that's the day bartender's name at the *Night Owl,* then that's exactly what I said."

"Gawd," the man said drawlingly. "I don't get it."

Caleb nodded. "Me too. Well, if you need me, I'll be around." He turned and walked out. The deputy's perplexed "yeah" followed him.

Will Guiness was in his cubbyhole office when Caleb entered the store. He nodded and looked away. A clerk came up but Doorn motioned him away and walked into the little office, carefully closed the door behind himself, and regarded the slightly frowning face of Guiness for several seconds before he spoke.

"How's the smugglin' business, Guiness?"

The merchant didn't answer right away. His pale eyes brooded a little as he looked up at Doorn from his chair in front of the desk. "Who are you, and what in hell are you talking about?"

"Name doesn't matter." Caleb fished a paper out of his pants pocket and tossed it carelessly onto the desk. "Read that, Guiness. It's a copy of a freight bill addressed to you, announcing the arrival of six cases of .44 ammunition. Good money in peddling shells to the Apaches, isn't there?"

The merchant hadn't moved. He made no motion toward the crumpled paper; there were splotches of white at the outer edges of his mouth. "Who —are—you?"

Doorn shrugged. "Name's Caleb Doorn."

"Oh," a flicker of hope flashed in the man's eyes. He remembered hear-

ing of the frontiersman's courtmartial at Santa Fe; things like that traveled fast. He almost smiled. Doorn, a renegade, could be bribed. Some of the color came back into his cheeks. "Lissen Doorn. You cost me two good men last night. I'll—"

"Why'd you sic them on me?"

"Because Cart told me you were nosing around at the ranch."

"You mean, then, you didn't have someone try a shot at me, out there?" Caleb's brows were drawn down in puzzlement.

"Well—no. Cart got suspicious and signalled one of the men—the 'breed, in fact—who always watches the ranch. He blasted you."

Caleb felt a slight sickness, suddenly. "You mean to say Cartwright junior is your pardner in this smuggling mess?" Guiness nodded curtly. Doorn waved away the words forming on the big man's lips. Then—he knew about the attempt on his father's life?"

Guiness laughed. "Knew about it? Hell—he *did* it."

Caleb swallowed twice. "He's your smuggling pardner, too?"

"That's right. Him and me are—"

"Shut up!"

Guiness' face colored and the blue eyes flashed but he said nothing. There was a savage look on Caleb Doorn's face. The merchant waited, unsure of his next move. Finally Caleb jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Walk out of here, Guiness."

"Where? Lissen—Doorn; I'll pay—"

"Get up and move out. One mistake, Guiness, and you'll be a dead man. Move!"

GUINESS got up, careful to keep his hands in plain sight, but he didn't give up so easily. "Doorn—what's this to you?"

Caleb's smile was sardonic. "First, it was the poor shooting at Diablo Canyon, where your 'breed got Dan Cartwright, then—"

"It wasn't the 'breed; I told you it was Cart himself."

Doorn wagged his head. "Hard to believe a son'd try to murder his own father." He shook his head at the torrent of words that started to interrupt him. "All right, then, after missing me once, it was the second try. The one that hit me in the arm, that sort of got me sore; and now it's the dead certain knowledge that you're the man behind the ammunition smuggling to the raiding Apaches in the Stronghold." He motioned toward the crumpled freight bill. "I brought that from Raton with me, Guiness; it's all I had to go on."

The balding head was shiny with sweat. "You mean you aren't—you weren't courtmartialed—?"

"Oh sure. I was courtmartialed just like it happened—but only so's I could work on renegades like you, by pretending to be one of you. It's the oldest dodge on earth, Guiness. Set a thief to catch a thief; only in this case, I was a renegade so I could catch you—and Cartwright." He suddenly thought of Bess and her father. It made him feel hollow inside. He reached over and gave Guiness a shove toward the door. "Don't stop walking until you're in the sheriff's office, and remember—no mistakes!"

It was a futile warning. Cart was behind a pile of bolted dress goods when the men emerged into the office, and opened fire immediately. Guiness broke and ran toward the shell and gun shelf. Caleb got a long sliver in his cheek when Cartwright's first bullet smashed into the doorjam beside his face. He drew and fired in one motion, Guiness stumbled, half turned and ripped out a string of livid curses, staggered, leaned over the counter and went down in a heap behind it.

Caleb felt real satisfaction that he had Cartwright in the store with him. He snapped two fast shots in the direction of the two-gun man. One sent a bolt of skyblue cloth rocketing drunk-

enly to the floor; the second shot brought a sharp yelp, then Caleb was walking down the aisle, hammer slippery with sweat under the light touch of his thumb. He saw young Cartwright as soon as the man showed his arm around the edge of the cloth goods counter. He wanted to laugh. The man was flat on the floor, trying to gain a second's advantage.

Both guns erupted simultaneously. Caleb gasped at the stab of pain in his left leg. He jumped behind the counter, darted quickly forward, leaned over and shot twice. Both times Cart jerked and flopped like a doll on a string, then silence took over and several minutes later the lanky deputy came in hesitatingly, a cocked riot-gun in his fist, eyes wide and glassy. Caleb holstered his gun and smiled. His leg ached, so he leaned against the counter.

"Self defense, deputy." The lawman looked at both dead men and gulped. Doorn tested his leg gingerly as Doctor Whett came through the door with a harrassed and anxious look. "Another one, doc."

WHETT PROBED and shook his head in anger. "This one'll cost you ten dollars, damn you. I've got other patients in Bent Horn too, you know. 'Can't be following you around picking up the pieces all the—"

"You got a reason for not driving me out to Wagonwheel tonight, Doc?"

"Well—no. I reckon not. Tell them about Cart?"

"Yeah. Y'see, he was helping me take Guiness, here, when he got shot."

Doctor Whett looked at Cart's body with its two bullet holes in the back, up high, between the shoulder blades, and the other one in his left palm; then he stared hard at the unarmed, crumpled mass that had been the smuggler and storekeeper. He brought his head around slowly, said nothing as he nodded, cold-eyed and wooden-faced; Whett exhaled audibly.

The deputy sheriff looked over at Caleb. "That's how it happened? You was bringin' Will over—?"

"Yeah. Bringing him to your place, young Cartwright and me, when he grabbed a gun and commenced shooting." The deputy nodded stolidly. Doorn looked impatient. "I'll be around tomorrow to give you the full details, deputy. Get the bodies moved, will you?"

"Yes, sir, right away."

Doctor Whett watched the thin lawman walk out, commandeer several men from the curious throng that was peering fearfully inside the store, then looked up at Caleb Doorn.

"No charge on that leg, after all; just changed my mind." he turned toward the door with a gruff cough. "Come on; let's go down to my place and dress the thing. We got to get started soon for the Wagonwheel, otherwise some busybody'll get there first."

Doorn smiled crookedly, said nothing and hobbled after Whett. He thought of three people now, sitting on the veranda of Wagonwheel, watching a Western sunset. Bess Cartwright, Old Dan, her father, and himself. Three faces West.

★

A Powerful Feature Novel of Midnight Murder and Mystery

At Your Local Newsstands

DEATH STALKS ON BLOODY FEET

by William F. Schwartz

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

"We're not killers, or anything like that, kid," Cy Bell told me, and I believed him. Even though I must have known that throwing the loop would lead to killing, sooner or later—lead to the position I was in right now!

THE WIDE LOOP

by Herbert D. Kastle

I MET CY BELL in the *Jewel Saloon* in Dry Creek. There was one thin dime in my pocket, and I was scared of what was going to happen when it was gone. Of course, I had my horse and saddle and Colt .44—but how far could they get me when there was no work to be found? So I spent a few cents on a beer and tried to load up at the free lunch counter. The bartender came over and said, "Don't pull that in here, kid; finish your beer and get out."

That's when Cy Bell stepped up. "I'm paying for this kid," he said, and plunked a silver dollar on the mahogany. "Lunch, beer, anything he wants."

The bartender shrugged and moved away. I mumbled thanks and didn't waste time filling my empty belly. Cy watched me wolf eggs and cheese and cold meat, and I knew I looked like hell with my old clothes and worn boots. Then he introduced himself and asked me to step outside a moment. He put his proposition straight on the line.

"I got a bunch of boys," he said. "We pick up a little beef here and there—just enough to eat on in these hard times. I can use an extra hand. You want in?"

I hesitated, and he said, "We're not killers, or anything like that, kid. Just throw a wide loop. Things are tough in Texas now; we gotta live."

He knew he wasn't taking any chances talking right out that way. I had no choice; it was either ride with Cy or starve. "Okay," I said, and felt good when he slapped me on the back.

Later, I met the bunch. There was Chick and Stuart and Big John and Yancey. That's what they called themselves, and I didn't ask for other names. We pulled a job a week later; took a few head from one herd and a few from another and drove some forty steers across the Big Muddy into Mexico. I ended up with eight silver cartwheels in my pockets, and I was eating regular. We did the same thing about a month later, and this time I got ten dollars. But it was the third job that showed me how wrong I'd been to join the bunch.

It was in Big Bend country, near a ranch called the Bar-Y, and the weather was with us. Cloudy, with the darkness so thick you could almost cut it, and a big herd just a half-hour's ride from our camp. Cy Bell was in front with Yancey; Chick and Stuart were right behind; me and Big John came up in back. That's how we were riding when we reached the herd.

Chick had scouted around earlier, and he was sure we'd have no trouble. The cowpokes were on the other side, he said, and not even a guard this side. So when the voice yelled at us to put up our hands, Bell was taken by surprise. He reined in, drew his iron and let fly with lead, not knowing where he was shooting. This spooked Yancey's horse and Yancey got thrown.

We all jammed up and milled around and there was an awful lot of noise going on—voices and shots and screaming horses. That's when I got scared, and saw exactly what I'd let myself in for. Any fool knows what they do to rustlers in Texas, and I felt I had a heap of living yet to do at eighteen.

YANCEY was on the ground, holding his stomach and screaming; then he got stepped on by someone's mount and lay still. Cy Bell was low in saddle, and suddenly I couldn't see him or his horse any more. I finally got my nag turned around and headed back, but that wasn't any good. They had us boxed in.

My iron was in my hand, and maybe I squeezed a shot into the sky once; but I didn't aim at those riders, even when they came out where we could see them. Why I didn't shoot at them, why I didn't want to kill them when they were killing us, I don't rightly know. Maybe it was because they were only doing their job, siding the law and all that, and we were living off stolen beeves.

Anyway, things happened so fast I could hardly believe it. Alongside my black, Chick's narrow face came apart and he was a red mess falling off saddle. Stuart was an older man, lots of gray in his hair, and I could see that hair up ahead. He was trying to go on through those who had us cut off from the herd. Then he jerked up high, almost standing in stirrups, and his horse carried him right into that herd. Only he fell off in a way that showed me he was dead.

That left Big John and me, and Bell who'd gotten away somehow. There were cowpokes coming out of the dark, yelling at us to surrender. Big John put a slug into one, and this young cowpoke coughed and grabbed his chest; then he toppled to the ground and was still. Big John spurred his mount and yelled my name. I tried to follow him, but something hit me in the shoulder; something so big it knocked me off my horse and put me to sleep...

WHEN I woke up, it was light and I was in a nice, clean bed. I moved a little and felt an awful burn in my left shoulder. I guess I made a noise, because the door opened and this girl was looking at me.

"It's all right," she said, and her voice was sharp and bitter, not at all like she looked, which was soft and pretty in a dark-haired sort of way. "It's only a flesh wound; the bullet passed clean through, so you'll live. But Andy Doyle won't. Andy's already buried near the mesquite patch where only old folks should be. But you'll live, and you'll hang."

That brought it all back, and I tried to sit up. The pain in my shoulder stopped me and I stayed where I was, biting my lips. "I never shot anyone," I said. "Who's this Andy Doyle?" But I knew it must have been the young cowpoke Big John had drilled through the chest.

"Just a cowboy," she said, her voice biting deep, her dark eyes hitting me like two fists. "Just a cowboy, Mister Killer."

She couldn't have been more than sixteen—maybe seventeen—but she was a full grown woman, with her levis stretched tight and her man's shirt even tighter. I liked her right off, and I wanted to say something to prove I wasn't a killer. But what could I say? I was with the bunch, and that young cowpoke had been with the others, and we'd shot it out. Nothing could change that.

She came into the room, up to the bed, and I saw she was carrying a glass of water. I took the glass and hunched up on my good shoulder and took a little sip. Then I drank it all so fast I almost choked. I wanted more, and I was hungry. I didn't say anything, but I looked at her.

She shrugged. "All right, I'll get you something to eat." She took the empty glass and went back to the door.

"Where am I, ma'am?" I asked.

"The Bar-Y, Mister Killer."

"Oh," I said, and figured I wouldn't ever make it to a town and a judge. "Why'd they bother putting me in bed and fixing me up if they're going to hang me?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she said, and laughed, showing nice white teeth but the worst hate I ever did see.

I sort of shriveled inside then, and I blurted out something I never thought I'd say, especially to a stranger. "It's not my fault. Folks gone almost a year, and nowhere to make my place, and work so scarce in Texas. I rode with the bunch because they were nice to me, and because I had to eat. Also, like I said, I never shot any one in my life."

Her laugh was still there, but then it got sort of weak, and then it died altogether. "I'll fix you some dinner," she said, and shut the door behind her.

I closed my eyes, remembering how she'd stopped her hard laugh. I began to feel that maybe she'd believe me and I wouldn't have to hang.

SOMEONE came into the room later. I opened my eyes and knew I'd slept a little. It wasn't the girl this time. It was a man, and he had a big tin plate; he put it on the bed and said, "Eat, boy."

It was hard sitting up, but he helped me and finally I leaned against the headboard. There was bacon and grits and hot biscuits. I ate fast and I ate everything. When I finished, he took the plate and went out and came back with a cup of coffee. I drank it and then said, "You got the makings, Mister?"

He took out tobacco and papers and built me one. He put it in my mouth and used a lucifer on his boot and I lit up. It sure tasted good, but I got a little dizzy. After I steadied, he said, "My name's Andrew Doyle. I own the Bar-Y; how're you feeling?"

"Not so bad," I answered, and then almost choked on my cigaret. I looked at him, and he smiled, smiled real hard, the way the girl had. "Andrew Doyle?" I mumbled. "Isn't that the cowpoke who got killed? I mean, Andy Doyle?"

He nodded. "Why sure. Andrew

Doyle, Junior, his name was." His smile went away and I almost wished it hadn't because the thing that took its place was terrible. His jaws lumped and his eyes got hot and lips pulled into a tight snarl. "My son," he said, "that you shot down in his youth, in his twentieth year of life. My Andy."

"I told the girl," I said, trying hard not to let him see how scared I was. "I told her, and I'll swear to you, that I never in all my days shot anything but a rattler and a few rabbits! I was with that bunch, but I didn't—"

"Don't excite yourself," he interrupted. "It's bad for your health." He pulled up a chair and sat down, and his face was quiet now. "I want you to get well real fast. I want you as healthy as you've ever been."

I stared at him, and then understood. "So I can hang slow?" I whispered. "So I can go kicking?"

"You guessed it," he said calmly.

I hated him then, but I lay down and let everything drain out of me. No use to hate, I figured; he was right in his way. And maybe I could break out of here—

As if he were reading my thoughts, he said, "In case you might try to get away, there's something you should see." He walked to the door, opened it and said, "Burl."

A big man with a rifle and holstered iron slouched into sight. He looked at me and said, "In the guts, boy, that's where I'll put it. Hope you give me the chance; we all liked Andy Junior."

I tried to remember a prayer that Ma used to say; any prayer at all. But it wouldn't come.

Andrew Doyle closed the door and went to the window behind my bed. He stuck his head out and called someone. I didn't bother turning to see, but the voice called in, "Use the window, young son of a dog. Chavez has the long knife for such as you, and it is even slower than hanging!"

Then Andrew Doyle was back in the chair. I looked up at him as he sat there, and I nodded. "You sure are a brave man," I said. "You sure can lick the odds, can't you."

His face got red and his fists clenched. I waited for him to do something, but he settled back and smiled.

"Well," I said, and closed my eyes, "I think you should tell the one at the door that I'm coming out when I'm a little stronger. I don't figure on waiting for the Fourth of July when you can hire a band."

"I'll tell him," he said.

"Good," I said. "Now get out and let me be."

I heard him get up and tramp to the door. I opened my eyes and he was looking at me. "If you're telling the truth," he said in a low voice, "how'd you happen to be riding with those killers in the first place?"

"Ask the girl," I answered, and tried not to feel a little hope. "I told her, and maybe she believed me."

"Maybe," he said, and his voice was hard again, "but I doubt it; she's my daughter." He went out, slamming the door.

SO THE girl was Andrew Doyle's daughter, and Andy Doyle's sister. How could she ever believe me? After all, I *was* riding with the bunch, and their killings were my killings. Only it didn't seem fair; Cy Bell had told me there'd be no killings.

But now I could see I'd been wrong and stupid to swallow that—to believe what I'd *wanted* to believe! If you rustled and got caught, you hung. Or maybe, if you were lucky and reached a judge and jury, you got sent to prison for years and years. So if you were in a tight, you used your gun; and if you used your gun, you killed. Only I hadn't ever killed—

I'd walk out that door one night soon. It would be easier than waiting and thinking.

The days passed slowly. I slept a

lot, and ate a lot, and the girl came and went, doing all the things that have to be done for a sick man. But she wouldn't talk to me. I tried a few times, asking her questions, but she wouldn't answer. So I gave up and just lay there. Sometimes we'd look at each other, and then I knew she didn't hate me any more; it wasn't hate I saw in her eyes. And I began to understand why she wouldn't talk. She knew what her father was going to do, and nothing could change it. She didn't want to let what showed in her eyes grow into something important.

But reading her eyes that way, my own feelings grew. Once I brushed her hand with mine, and she turned quickly away. But I'd seen her face soften, her lips quiver, and I ached inside with wanting to help her and myself. Then I remembered the men outside my door and window, and the terrible look on Andrew Doyle's face, and I knew that it was better to forget everything but Ma's prayers.

It was maybe a week from the time I'd been shot. I must have been dozing because I suddenly opened my eyes and saw an oil lamp burning in the corner. Also, the girl was there, sitting near the bed and looking at me. "Tell me again," she said, as if we'd been talking all the time. "Tell me, like you did the first day, that you didn't shoot Andy."

My heart began to pound. "I didn't shoot Andy," I said. "I never shot anyone in my life. I rode with the bunch, but I didn't know what it meant."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Eighteen. And my name's Stevie—" I stopped, and felt myself get red. "Steve Burrows."

"Stevie," she said, and her eyes were soft. "Your mom called you Stevie, and so you're Stevie Burrows, just like Andrew Junior was Andy."

"How does your mom feel about it?" I asked.

"Oh, she's dead almost seven years now. But I know how Pa feels. He's not sure you actually shot at anyone in that fight, but he's not going to let that stop him."

I said nothing.

She stood up, walked to the window and looked into the night. "I don't want you to die, Stevie. I asked Pa just before if he'd let me ride to town and get the marshal, but he said no. He's set on having you hang."

That's when I decided it was time to walk out the door. I wasn't waiting any longer!

I SAT UP, moving as fast as I could, jumped out of bed and grabbed her by the shoulders. She gave a little gasp and turned. "You look silly in Lolita's old nightgown," she said.

I almost died when I remembered that big tent I was wearing. Then I said. "So what? Who thinks about things like that when he's going to hang or get shot?" But I felt ashamed anyway. "Where's my clothes?" I asked.

She jerked her head at a chest against the wall. "Those old things you were wearing Lolita burned; she said they smelled like bad stew. But in that chest are some duds we keep around for the boys."

My face burned like dry kindling as I pushed her toward the chest. Lucky I was holding her, too. I felt so weak that I'd have fallen on my face if she wasn't there to lean on.

"Get me what I need," I said. "Go on!"

I wasn't scaring her, and I knew it. She could have called in those guards, or even handled me herself, I was that weak. But it was as if we were playing a game, and we both went along with it.

She opened the chest and picked out pants and shirt and other things. She held them in her arms and said, "What are you going to do when you get dressed?"

I didn't know, so I didn't answer.

I took the clothes and then had to drop everything and grab for her. "Little dizzy," I said, and breathed deep. "Few minutes and I'll be fine."

We were close, and I could smell how nice her hair was, and her skin too. I moved back then, remembering the night-gown. "I'm getting dressed," I said, and this time felt strong enough to stand like a man. "Turn your back."

She smiled a little and turned to face the door. "Am I your prisoner?" She asked. "Your hostage?"

I got into those duds fast, and they didn't fit me half bad. Working that way helped me feel human again, and I saw what she meant by that question.

"Yes," I said. "I'll walk out of here using you as my shield." I got into my own boots that were under the bed. "If you'll let me."

She paused before answering. "That's not the way a man fighting for his life should talk."

I walked over to her, turned her around. "And you're not acting like someone who hates me should act. Fact is, you're helping me, putting words in my mouth."

"Am I?" she said, and then reached up and touched my cheek with her lips. I felt weak again, but for a different reason. "Well, I guess I am, Stevie." She suddenly pushed me away. "But that's only because I feel you should get a fair trial," she said sharply. "Soon as we're on the range, I'll leave you and ride for the marshal."

I looked at her, wanting to tell her she wasn't doing it just for that. But then I asked myself what good could come of our loving each other, and I turned away. I went to the chest and searched through it.

"Gun and holster are on the sideboard," she said, and pointed to the corner.

I went over and strapped on the rig and pulled the .44 from holster. "Empty," I said, and saw that the belt was empty too.

"Yes," she said, "but they won't know it."

I didn't argue, and even thought it was better that way. With all that might happen, I wouldn't want to die knowing I'd done something real bad. "All right," I said. "Let's walk out that door, miss."

"Judy," she said. "Judy Doyle."

So, after a full week, we finally knew each other's names. But we knew other things too, more important things, only it wasn't any use to think of them.

I CAME up to her, drew the gun and said, "Turn around so I can hold it in your back."

She turned. "Good luck," she said, and then shook her head three or four times. "I must be crazy," she whispered. "I must be!"

"No," I said. "You're the nicest girl I ever did meet. And if I could, I'd give you anything you wanted—my life, too."

She walked to the door then and opened it and we stepped into a hall. Almost at the same time, something happened outside. There were shouts, and two quick shots, and the sound of horses pulling in fast. I didn't have time to worry about that because coming along the hall was the hombre who wanted to gutshoot me. Burl, Andrew Doyle had called him.

"Drop your hardware," I said.

He looked at Judy and shivered like a big dog on a rope. Then he dropped his rifle and unbuckled his gun harness and dropped that too.

I pushed Judy ahead of me and turned left, away from Burl. Judy made a little motion with her body and I knew she wanted me to go the other way. I turned and we passed a few inches from Burl, but he had his eyes on the gun I held in Judy's back and he didn't so much as twitch a muscle. We walked past two doors, and by this time the noise from outside had stopped.

Then a door swung open near the end of the hall and I almost dropped my gun in surprise. It was Cy Bell, and he was coming out of what looked like an office, heading for the front door. I called his name and he swung around, raising his gun.

"Kid!" he said, and took in the picture with one quick flash of his narrow eyes. "I was looking for you. Follow me, and hold onto that gal."

I did what he said without even thinking, but now there was a change in Judy. She stiffened a little as we moved out the front door. In the yard I saw Judy's father lined up against a wall with two other men. Big John was covering them with his Colt. When Andrew Doyle saw Judy, he bellowed and rushed forward, even though he was a dead one if Big John wanted it that way. But it was Bell who took care of him, coming in fast, chopping him over the head with his gun. Andrew Doyle went flat in the dust and lay still.

"Pa!" Judy cried, and I let her get away from me. "Pa, are you—"

Cy Bell caught her up in his arms, put her on a horse and got on behind her. Big John yelled at me. I did what he said and climbed on a tall piebald. Then John was on his horse, firing a few shots in the air to make the hired help duck for cover, and we were riding hell for leather out of there.

IT WASN'T until about three hours later, after we'd backtracked and gone down a stream to lose our sign, that I had a chance to think. Then I began to worry about Judy. Sure, Cy and John were my pards—they'd risked their necks to save mine. But when it came to women, they weren't at all the kind of men for a lady; a real lady, I mean. Even thinking about how they acted in the saloons across the Big Muddy made me scared for Judy.

Cy called a halt in a small hollow behind a hill, and we dismounted and scouted around. That is, Cy and Big John scouted around. I ran over to Judy and grabbed her hands and said, "You all right?"

She was no more than a shadow in the darkness, but I thought I could see her eyes, big and scared. She yanked her hands away from me.

"You lied!" she whispered. "You knew all along they were coming for you! You made me think I was giving you a fair chance when all the time it was part of a plan!"

"I didn't!" I said. "Honest, it surprised me as much—" I heard the footsteps.

Cy came out of the darkness and stopped. He looked at Judy and said, "The kid did a good job grabbing you. Your pa and his hands will have the whole country looking for us, but no one'll fire a shot as long as we got you. So you're taking a trip to Mexico, honey."

I knew how tough Cy could be, so I had to speak soft. "I think we should send her back, Cy. Maybe they'll stop looking for us if she gets home tonight. Besides, she helped me. She was letting me use her as a shield; she even got the idea herself—"

"Sure," he said, and I wished I could see his face because it sounded like he was laughing. "That gun in her back had nothing to do with it."

"It's empty," I said.

"Let me see," Cy said, sort of surprised.

I hesitated, and then heard Big John cough behind me. "Let him see, kid," he said, voice soft like always. "You ain't forgot we came to get you when it meant our own necks?"

That was the whole trouble. I couldn't forget that, and I couldn't forget what Judy had done either.

I drew the Colt and John's hand came out of the darkness behind me and grabbed it. "I'll just check," he said, and he cracked the chambers open and shut. "Empty, Cy. Just like he told you. Also, his belt."

Cy laughed. "What a kid. Makes time with the ladies even while waiting to hang. Give him back his gun, John."

"How about a few rounds?" I asked.

"No hurry," Cy said. "Wait until later, when you've had a chance to rest up."

Judy spoke then, and her voice was filled with hate. "You're all murderers! My pa will see that you hang!"

Cy spoke to me, but I knew he was answering her. "In case you haven't figured it out for yourself, kid, Chick and Stuart and Yancey are dead. Her pa's lucky we didn't gun him down back at the ranch."

I CHANGED the subject fast. "You sure took a chance," I said, "coming right into the Bar-Y like that; how could you know that only three, four hands would be around?"

"We cased the place about a week," Big John answered. "Knew they wouldn't expect us to be so close after the shooting match. We saw most of the cowpokers leave for the herd late this afternoon, and figured a big drive was on. We also saw the boss ride in from town with—"

"Time we ate," Cy broke in.

John shut up, and I was just as glad he did. I'd begun to feel tired and that shoulder was hurting something fierce. I just had to lie down awhile. I found a blanket-roll on my horse, and flopped on it. In less than a second it seemed, I was asleep.

I woke up when someone shook me. "Kid!" Big John was whispering. "Kid, they've trailed us! Cy wants you right way!"

I got up, stiff and half-asleep, and walked after Big John, seeing him clear because there was gray light showing in the east. It was getting close to sunup.

"We're not waiting much longer," a voice shouted from somewhere on top the hill. "If you don't prove Miss Judy's all right, we'll come in and gun the lot of you!"

John stopped in front of Cy's blanket and squatted, pulling me down too. Judy was sitting there, white-faced and trembling. Cy turned and gave me a piece of paper. I looked at it, and saw the line of writing.

I'm all right. I'll stay that way if you leave. Judy Doyle.

"Bring it to those men on the hill," Cy said. "Her pa or one of the others will recognize her handwriting. Then they'll be scared to do anything and we can make it to the border. Understand?"

I understood, all right, and it was the only thing for us to do. Cy wasn't stupid, and he wasn't ever cruel that I had seen—like Judy's pa had been to me. Also, my own neck was involved. So I stood up with that note in my hand and I walked toward the hill.

"Stevie!" Judy cried. "Stevie, I want to go—" And then I heard the slap.

My heart jumped, and I wanted to run back and kill whoever had hit her. But then I remembered that Cy and John had put themselves in this mess by coming to get me. But slapping Judy, and maybe bothering her later—

So I was torn apart inside. Cy and John against Judy; each pulling hard, pulling until my guts ached. But I couldn't cross my pards!

I went up the hill, waving the piece of paper, and then I stopped dead. The light was stronger, I could see that piece of paper clear, and it wasn't the side Judy had written on. It was the other side, and there were printed words that read, *Texas Grange-Association Bank.*

I BEGAN walking again and reached the top of the hill. Two men grabbed me and I was hurried down the other side to where Andrew Doyle was squatting on the ground, his face older than I remembered it, his head bandaged in white linen.

"She's all right," I said, giving him the piece of paper. "She'll stay all right as long as you wait here and do nothing."

His face worked, and I thought for a minute he was going to cry. "Like you say," he whispered, holding the paper tight in his hand. "But when will you let her go? You've got to let her go! She's just a child!"

I kept quiet, and he looked at me and then nodded. "Yes," he said. "You've got good reason to hate me. Making you wait for hanging wasn't right; even hanging without a trial wouldn't have been right. But I'm begging you to forget, for Judy's sake."

"Did my pards rob you when they came to get me?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "They must have been watching the road to town and seen me escorted to the ranch by the marshal. I'm buying some breed short-horns and took twelve hundred dollars in paper money from the bank. But that's not important; Judy's all I want."

I nodded, but it was important to me. Cy and John hadn't come to the Bar-Y to save my neck; they'd come for that cash. Cy had been heading for the front door when he'd spotted me. That meant he'd have let me hang. And they hadn't told me about the loot, not wanting to split with me.

"Give me six shells," I said to Andrew Doyle. "Forty-fours."

He looked at me; then worked at his belt. I took the shells and loaded my Colt. Then I walked back to the top of the hill and down the other side to where Judy and Cy and Big John were waiting.

"Let's ride," I said, my tongue thick in my mouth. "They'll trail us to the border and let us cross over if we leave the girl Texas side."

"Sure," Cy said, grinning at Judy. "That's what I figured. Only we won't need their say-so when we reach the border, and this little lady won't want to leave us. Now will you, honey?"

Judy's mouth trembled, and Big John laughed his deep laugh. "We're all pards," he said. "Share and share alike."

"Yeah," I said. "But let's move."

Cy and John got busy packing their gear, but Cy held onto Judy all the time. I walked to my blanket and began to roll it, watching them close. I knew what I had to do, and I knew how. There was only one way I'd stand a chance against two such fast draws. And I had to come out on top, for Judy.

When it looked about as right as it ever would be, I drew my Colt and said, "Cy, I took my share of the paper money last night."

He whirled around, and his eyes streaked to his saddle bags before fixing on me. "You dirty little—" he began, and he was drawing at the same time.

I SAW JUDY jump away, and I didn't wait any longer. I put a bullet in Cy's chest. As he screamed, I turned and centered on Big John. He had his gun out in that smooth draw, and we fired together so that it sounded like one shot. He was surprised and hurried, and his lead went wild. Mine was

straight and got him square in the belt-line. He fell on his back and kicked, but he didn't raise his gun.

I walked to Cy and saw he was dead. Then I went over to Big John. His gun was still in his hand, but his fingers weren't gripping the butt. "Kid," he gasped, "don't shoot no more, for the love of gawd! I was going to split with you. Honest—" He coughed and his eyes bulged.

"Maybe," I said, feeling sick inside. "But you were going to let me hang before that."

"Cy made me—" John began; then jerked his head and mumbled, "Who's that coming?"

I began to turn, but something told me not to. John's eyes had cleared, and he had that gun on me and was squeezing the trigger. "Sucker!" he said, and flame lanced into me.

I was falling, and shooting at the same time. I saw his face fall apart under my slugs, and then I saw nothing.

Later, I woke up in that bed on the Bar-Y, and Judy was sitting there. She kissed me and said, "Now you've got dimples in both your shoulders." She went on to say that her pa wasn't going to call the marshal and that I'd have a place at the Bar-Y as long as I wanted it.

"That's fine," I said, and looked at her. I tried to tell her everything with my eyes, but she blushed and looked away and I had to speak. "Judy," I said, "I can't stay here, seeing you all the time and not being able to do anything about it."

She blushed some more and said, her voice low, "I already told Pa that he'd have to get used to you. I already told him how—how I feel. He put up a fight but not too much."

That did it. I grabbed her and kissed her and forgot those plugged shoulders—for a minute.

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TWO FRIGHTENED COWBOYS

by W. Edmunds Claussen

THERE WAS a mysterious quality about evening that laid heavy on one's mood. The old abandoned town lay so helpless; in itself it was a grave, with the brooding mountain rising behind the last row of decrepit buildings and forming its headstone.

I had heard that thirty or forty people still lived at Ophir and I told Considine this as we rode toward the place.

"Funny," he mused, "how gold will make them stay. The old ones can't quite give up their dreams. They'll hang on as long as there's breath in their bodies, hoping to pick the vein up again—hoping to strike it rich."

He had an unnatural set to his face. I never saw him more thoughtful during the years we ran together. A man with spring-steel nerves, a half smile now drew his mouth taut and strain lay behind his eyes.

"Thirty people," I said again, softly, "where there used to be thousands! They won't interfere with us, though;

my uncle was explicit the way he described the stopes."

"You think you can go right to the place?" he asked, and his eyes were boring into mine. "It was clever of you to count me in this. One man couldn't hunt around those drifts and crosscuts without somebody finding out. The way we've worked it, one can scout outside and lead any inquisitive people away while the other's getting to that highgrade."

To the highgrade that Rafael Quinn, my uncle, had written his brother about! I had found the letter among my father's effects—apparently Father had not cared for that kind of money. A dozen men of the night shift had come upon the pocket and not reported to the company. That rich stuff lay moulding now under the tracks of a tunnel that hadn't been used for a quarter of a century. According to Rafael's letter, only a few who knew the secret of the Ophir were still living. That was ten years ago. They were afraid to come back because of the heavy penalty for highgrading.

We rode into the limits of the town as the sun leaned down against the hills and cast her ruddy glow to the weathered buildings. I was fighting my conscience again. There was some good in me in those days, and a lot of bad. Considine and I were two very tough hombres—we thought... Somebody still held the rights to the Ophir workings and I should by all standards of honesty report as soon as we cut the treasure from its hiding place.

Perhaps it could be worked on a percentage basis, and if I did this with any cleverness at all it needn't come out as highgrade. A hundred thousand or so can be split a few ways and still have a nice pile left. Considine thought we needn't report everything we took out of the hole. But I couldn't make up my mind to split my pile with anybody; I didn't have the scruples of my father. Even when I was young they said I took after my uncle Rafael.

Ophir was a dead town, no question about that. The building fronts leaned awrily—their bleached signs dry with a bone's chalky dryness. I began to suspect I had been optimistic about it having a population of thirty. It didn't seem possible that life could be sustained in Ophir. The empty echoes of our horses' feet came back eerie and flat. I shot Considine a sideward glance and he was peering dead ahead. I think he felt it, too. This was like invading the sanctity of the sepulchre.

FINALLY my gaze picked out a two-story building which still showed shreds of yellow paint clinging fast to its boards. It was high in front, with at least a ten-foot framework above its roof on which I could pick out the words *Quinn's Hotel & Saloon*. I put my mare to the decayed walk and Considine kicked his sorrel without any questions.

I said, "We might as well sleep in a bed. I'll take the gear inside and you can find a stable for the nags." His curious gaze stayed on me and I finished with a brief laugh. "My place, Considine. Make yourself at home. Dad inherited the hotel and all this is mine, through him."

We hadn't hit the street before a strange looking character appeared from the building next to the hotel. He was past eighty, I'd say, and he wore dun-colored pants that were like two bags sewed over his legs. He had a brown skin and a bristly beard that needed combing. Considine's voice hid a kind of laughter. "Howdy, Pop. Where's everybody?"

The old fellow's eyes screwed tight as he looked us over. If I ever saw disgust in a man I read it then. His voice came from behind the bushes; it startled you. The kind of a voice that had grown dead from not being used—I'd heard of men who lived by themselves who talked to rats and birds simply to

hear the sound of something human.

"Ain't nobody. I'm Hardrock George and I'm alone in this place and I like it that way."

"I'd heard there were others," I said. "I thought there were thirty-odd people in Ophir."

He spat a load, shook his head. "The Chinese moved on a couple years back. Not enough left for even one of them... So you drifted from Montana." (It was a statement, not a question. He got that from our accents, from our saddles. He had a sharp eye and didn't miss anything about us.)

"Cowmen!" Hardrock chortled. "Never saw them do a lick of work out of their saddles. Maybe you got in trouble at home and sloped out. Both of you got that hunted look, like a dog that's been cuffed. Give you twenty-four hours and you'll be drifting the way you came in."

Considine snickered. "We'll be around, Pop."

The old man's eyes sharpened. "Got a map, have you? Got something they sold you that'll take you to highgrade? They all try it but nobody's been able to find it. You ain't got anything better than the rest. I'm the one that'll get it."

Considine had a poker face that never showed emotion, but I caught a burst of heat reaching the surface. I was afraid of how he might answer. He could be rough when he wanted, he had a tongue that could drip with poison—and I had taken a friendly viewpoint toward the old man. It was that soft spot coming to life inside; fight it as I would I couldn't subdue it completely.

But Considine only laughed in an offhanded way. "All right, old man, don't stand too close to the horses. We just come outa the brush and they might mistake you for bunch grass. Git away, we're off-saddlin'."

Surprisingly, he walked on and lost himself somewhere in the maze of empty buildings. I think disgust at Considine was more than he could bear. In the meantime, Considine and I were throwing saddle bags onto the boardwalk.

THERE IS something about a hotel that never dies. It has seen too much of life. It remembers the plans that were made within its framework, its guests enjoying their brief pleasures, some sinking, perhaps, into the slough of despair. It has seen death in its time, and newlyweds in their room for the first time hidden away from the world; these cardinal moments linger in the tapestry of its walls.

My uncle's place was very symbolic of himself. A picture of him came to me as I walked into the still barroom. It was a picture ingrained with photographic clarity that swept back from the past. I was then very young, with curly hair and my first knee breeches. He was tall and so straight in his striped trousers, and the cavalry jacket from which he had removed the insignia of the South. Captain Rafael Quinn.... I heard again my mother's hushed whisper that he had been a Confederate raider.

He had a sharp, lean face with an aquiline nose, piercing eyes and long sideburns, and he crossed the room swiftly and tousled my hair. I think it was the first visit he'd made to my father's. He chuckled in his hearty way and gave me a Mexican coin. Then, as an afterthought, a whole handful of paper. Confederate money. I remember I played with the bills until they wore out and tore through the center of Jefferson Davis' face....

Considine came into the barroom from stabling our horses and looked curiously about. He kicked a mounted deer head that had dropped from the wall, and then he sat on it with his back to the plaster. All the while his fingers curled a cigaret. His eyes played ceaselessly over the room. The fixtures were intact, the ancient bar scarcely bore a scratch, a walnut Seth

Thomas clock hung above the dining room door with its hands stopped at 11:45.

He pinched the end of the cigaret and tipped his head toward the bar. "Hardly a chance for a drink?"

"Hardly. I guess Hardrock took care of that. Him and the Chinese."

He let his smoke drift at the ceiling, took another look. "This uncle of yours must have been a dashing fellow. I can still feel him here in the barroom."

It gave me a peculiar sensation, but I understood what he meant. I had experienced much the same feeling when I first came into the room, but then I had known Rafael, Considine had not. He had that power, that consuming will that made itself known to all men. I told Considine, "He was one of General Joe Shelby's men. The Feds called them Shelby's mules, because they could take so much and never wear out. After the War he wouldn't live under the Yankee flag and he crossed the border with Shelby and made the long march to Mexico City. Maximilian turned down their swords and I don't know how long he stayed before coming home."

Considine nodded and I knew he hadn't been surprised. He was still watching me shrewdly. "How did your uncle die?"

"I don't know the details but it was violent. It must have happened in Ophir— Dad never explained completely."

He got off his seat. "Let's see if they overlooked a bottle. Just for the hell, I could stand a drink."

I laughed as he went around the backbar and rummaged through the dust. When he came out he stood rubbing the floor with the toe of his boot. His voice held a quiet inflection. "They say blood never rubs out. Could this be the place where somebody lay dying?"

"For gawd's sake, Considine!"

I stared at the spot where he stood but could make nothing out in the deepening gloom. Then he gave me a shock. "These old saloons all saw their fights. It's not so strange. Look here."

I followed his hand until I found a hole in the dark panel work of the counter. A round hole about belly-high to a man. It was clear then that a man had died at this spot where Considine stood. I tried to visualize the scene but there were too many distracting influences in my mind. Yet it served to heighten the peculiar fascination of this room. Impulsively I laid my hand over the bullet hole. The tip of my little finger would just enter the hole—a .45 had bored this after passing through a man's body.

Considine said tiredly, "Let's see what the stalls are like upstairs. Too bad they didn't leave a cook behind in this place."

"We could stop by and see George," I snickered, and Considine groaned deep in his throat. We lifted our packs together and climbed the stairs. The woodwork was still solid under weight and turned at a landing where there were three paintings in massive frames. Considine paused to rub a match and his cry echoed throughout the rooms. We stared at three striking women looking back at us from gilt frames. One was in bell-shaped, black dancing costume; the others wore gowns but their bodices were cut dangerously low.

Afterwards, when the match had burned out, we began ascending the final steps. "Rafael was a blade with the ladies," I said.

Considine answered me slyly. "So I judge."

THERE WAS scarcely enough light to see with on that upper floor. We went from room to room finding an assortment of furniture left very much as it had been when the hotel was in its prime. In one chamber stood a massive mirror between two low chests, and two beds stripped bare except for mattresses. We threw our belongings

on the floor and I opened a window to let in the air. There was a grand view of the mountain from here overlooking the rear of the town.

A last flush of scarlet clung to the sky and the mountain loomed against this with a surprising nearness. How many had stood in this spot and gazed at the sunsets? Pondering on what their fate was to be, on the wealth that lay in that black hump? I could feel their nervousness come over me, their brash hope, the same restless anticipation that went with each fresh strike.

I heard the bedsprings creak beyond me but it was now too dark to see Considine. I knew how he would be; stretched out on the mattress, his boots still on, his gun-leather at his side. He said, "Might as well get some sleep. In the morning we'll leave early and scare something loose from the hills for breakfast. Then the highgrade."

I laid my head back, my hands under my neck. "These old places could tell us what it's all about. They met men. They saw life."

He didn't want to talk and he rolled on his side. It got black in the room, and very quiet. It was so still I wondered why I couldn't hear Hardrock George moving around somewhere. After all, he was in Ophir—but maybe he was already asleep. I wondered how long he'd been here. Maybe afterward —after we cut out the highgrade, I'd talk to him about my uncle. He might answer some of the questions that leaped through my brain.

A long time later I heard Considine stir. There was something bothering him and I thought he was sitting in his bed staring at me. He asked quietly, "You suppose that old man knows where the highgrade's hidden? What if he beats us?"

"No," I said, "he don't know anything. Old men talk that way. You give me a day in the tunnel—maybe if the stuff's been packed away right we'll be out of here tomorrow. Keep quiet now and let me sleep."

I AWOKE a good deal later wondering where I was. There was a sound of shifting dishes, of knives and forks and stemware, coming from the room below. We had had a hard day pushing into Ophir and my mind was drugged by sleep. It was a while before the layout of the hotel came to me: we were in the chamber directly above the dining room. But why were people eating in the old hotel? More important than that, where had they come from?

It was in my mind to waken Considine and then I thought better of that. I'd heard of rats scurrying about and making the same noises I heard in the dining room and I decided to let Considine sleep and go down alone. I slid my feet out of bed, got them into boots. It was dark as pitch in the bedroom.

Nearer the door that led to the stairway hall I felt the hackles gently lift along my neck. There was a lamp burning below stairs, and the sweet-bitter fragrance of a Havana cigar reached me. It gave me a brief fright and then I got this behind me and I found myself cursing George. He'd told me the town was deserted except for himself and below stairs now I could catch a babble of voices!

I descended as far as the bend in the stairs and my ears picked up a fresh sound that pulled me short. It was the steady, almost hypnotic tock-tock of the Seth Thomas clock! I knew then there was something wrong—either with the old building, or with me mentally. It was always possible for someone to drift into Ophir and select the Quinn House as we had done for the night. But no one would start that ancient clock—there could be no explanation for that.

There was only a momentary fear during which my insides seemed to turn to water, and then I found myself walking on. I think I knew there on the landing that something was going on that would be of interest to me. Something that was to explain the past

and shape my life for the years to come. There could have been no turning back, no holding me after that.

Swinging into the barroom I tried to grasp it all in one glance. A trio of miners were playing cards in the corner, against the wall two others were watching and talking. The room was well illuminated by its pair of hanging lamps and it was amazing how light added color and warmth. The wood glowed with a soft, hand-rubbed sheen. The floor appeared clean, the window-glass shone. My eyes searched after the deer head and it still lay against the wall where Considine had kicked it. But the metronomic ticking of the clock was intolerable! Its hands stood on 11:50.

A voice from the bar turned me swiftly. "You arrived late, Mr. Quinn. What'll you have. Sour mash or brandy?"

"Brandy," I answered without actually thinking. Some quality in his voice was going through me. It seemed like a voice transmitted through a hollow box.

The bartender was in shirt sleeves, a linen shirt with lavender stripes, and he wore trimmed mustaches and held his hair carefully combed into place with oils. He was pouring my liquor, not paying me special attention.

"How do you feel, sir? It'll take time to get over what she did. I still can't grasp it. To do that, Mr. Quinn!"

Inherently I knew he had mistaken me for my uncle. It was going through me like hot brands, and of course I had no notion what he was talking about. I said quietly, "You never know what a woman will do."

"Of course not. But to do *that*, sir! That Elsa should go that far!"

The brandy was the smoothest thing I'd ever put down my throat. I tried to catch the label but the bottle was partly turned—it bore a steel engraving of a riverboat and the word Lafayette.

By now the bartender was acting peculiar. He lifted the bottle hurriedly and replaced it in his rack. His eyes were on me constantly but it was strange how they had no character. "I'm sorry," he said. "I mistook you for someone else."

I said sharply, "Rafael?" To his slight nod I continued, "There was always a resemblance. People who knew, liked to remind me of it."

His hand stretched out and almost touched me. I mean to say his hand lay on my arm and yet there was no impression of weight, no substance. "I don't know how you fit in this," he said. "I can't understand where you belong. But don't interfere with us or move out of your own estate."

He was quiet, then, and went about cleaning the bar. I could see he meant me no harm and I turned to the card players in their corner. It struck me now how they were dressed after a fashion long out of style. They were vague, more distant than the bartender, and I'm sure they didn't know I was in the room. I don't mean to say they weren't solid, real; there was simply eons of time between us and they hadn't become aware of my presence.

I FELT A draft of air on my back and then he came through the room with the stride I remembered so well. He was tall and lean in his black coat, but I thought his face had aged tremendously since I saw him when I was a boy. The card players paused to nod and one called him by name. Rafael! I remember my mother whispering to me men always stopped what they were doing to take notice of him.

It was uncanny how the conversation between him and the bartender was precisely what had taken place before. Rafael bowed his head and I think grief passed through him at whatever it was Elsa had done. I found myself wondering which of the three paintings she was.

A waitress walked through to order drinks from the bartender. She brought with her a water pitcher which she left

on the bar beside me when she returned to the dining room with her glasses. I looked into the pitcher and found ice floating in the water and that surprised me until I remembered it would get blue cold in the mountains during winter. A town of several thousands would have its ice house, of course.

Rafael's voice broke into my thinking. These were the first distinct words I'd picked up since the bartender's grieving about Elsa. Rafael was talking slowly:

"Well, we had the funeral this afternoon and she's gone. I never thought she'd do it either. Her conscience, I suppose. It didn't give her any peace. Funny what it can do if you sit and let yourself brood over your past. Give me another brandy, will you please?"

The clock on the wall stood three minutes to twelve. I sensed the inevitable about to happen even though I could hardly be considered a physical part of the room. The card players threw in their hands and sat whispering about something they'd seen through their window. A hush appeared to have fallen—a hush except for the clock. It still ticked brazenly on in its aggravating measurement of time. The bartender paced a few feet aside from Rafael and stood frozen with his hands tight to the counter. His eyes were fastened to the door.

"Quinn!".

The name shattered the room so suddenly I jumped under its impact. I saw Rafael turn smoothly to face the front door. He held his brandy casually before him about even with his breast pocket. The tired look seemed to ease from his face and he ventured a smile.

"Henry, step in!"

A burly, thick fellow strode into the room letting his glance touch each side of the entrance before he moved deeper. I thought him afraid of some trick, of ambush. He said stolidly, "I've come for her. Where is she?"

Rafael lifted his shoulder. "I'm sorry, you're too late. Come here and we'll have a drink together."

"I don't want your drink. I've come for Elsa."

My uncle studied him a long moment. I saw the years roll from his shoulders and he looked the way I remembered him first. The tall, devil-may-care fellow who had ridden the long trails into Mexico; the dashing officer of General Joseph Shelby's command. I believe he was ready to fight the intruder, ready to turn him from the saloon. Then this passed and the lines swept back to his face.

"Some things you lose, Henry. Just make up your mind to it. I took Elsa from you because she wanted to come. There wasn't any force used on my part. I'd give her back gladly if it weren't too late. I think she grieved for you. I really think she did."

"Where is she, Quinn?"

My uncle's eyebrows lifted. "Come help yourself to a drink, Henry. She hung herself and we buried her today."

I don't pretend to know how the burly man whipped his pistol so fast. I believe he must have worn a pivot holster. I was looking at Rafael's brandy glass and one moment it was there, the next it was gone. Rafael buckled slowly and didn't go down all at once. Parts of him gave way first. He was on his knees, now he was reaching over the floor with his long hands, his face well up off the boards. Next his shoulders made contact and still he held his head high. There was a proud, fine imprint about his mouth even yet. I couldn't look when finally I heard him strike at the last.

I BELIEVE the lights had gone out when I heard Considine call. I wondered had he heard the shot. And then I decided not, he wouldn't have been conscious of the things that were going on below. I thought, what in God's name should I tell him? He wouldn't accept any explanation I gave him.

Then I remembered the pitcher

filled with water stood on the bar beside my elbow. I reached for it as I called him.

"Just coming from the well, Considine. I'm bringing you a drink, too."

I went out through the black hall, up the winding steps. I held my pace steady that he couldn't read the fright that whipped my legs. Once I caught the clink of ice against glass and my heart took fresh fright. I'd forgotten about the ice! How could I explain that?

Something gossamer, something soft drifted past my cheek as I entered his room. I don't know what it was and I never think of it now. At that moment I believed cobwebs brushed my face. Considine's voice came out of the darkness and I knew he was sick

"Can you find a lamp?"

I scratched a match and sat my pitcher on the bureau. Considine was sick, all right. His skin had a greenish hue and his eyes swept over the four walls without registering what they saw. He wiped the damp hair back from his forehead. "What're you doing downstairs?"

"I went after water. I told you that."

He asked next, kind of quietly, "Anything go on down there?"

It startled me and I took a moment to answer. "I bumped into one of the doors and knocked it shut."

"Ah." He laid down on the mattress. "I never did sleep if I went to bed on an empty belly."

I was glad it was over so simply and I sat on my bed to pull my boot. Then the thought raced back about the ice in the water container and I let my glance angle toward the bureau. The lamplight fell fairly on it showing me dust in layers both inside and out of the pitcher. I think I was glad. As easy to explain that as ice.

I must have slept toward morning because Considine was not in bed when I turned over. I stepped into my boots quickly and met him in front of the hotel bringing our horses. He put my mind at rest on one point immediately. He wore a frown—the first time I'd seen anything like expression break through Considine's deadpan face.

"Damned if I feel like wasting time in Ophir. Hardrock George probably found that highgrade years ago and moved it. What else keeps him alive?"

"You might be right," I admitted. "Let's drift."

Before we left I glimpsed the old man's face pressed against a window pane of the place next door. I let Considine ride on a short piece and told him I'd catch up. I got to Hardrock in a hurry and told him he'd been right last night. Cowmen drift on, the hills are greener on the other side.

I let him have the letter Rafael had written to my father. I asked him not to open it until we'd pulled out of Ophir. One thing I got in exchange from Hardrock. He told me the room in the hotel in which Elsa had hung herself.

I don't know what Considine saw that night we slept at the Quinn House. It was something we never talked about afterward. The short time Considine and I rode together after that neither of us mentioned Ophir.

★

A Thrilling Novel of Midnight Mystery

DOUBLE PAYOFF

by Francis C. Battle

Look for the March

SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

Jack Gallun had sworn he'd get Hailey, even if he had to come back from hell to do it. And if there was one man who might conceivably do just that, it was a Gallun

HARD BREED

by Zachary Strong

HUNK ANDERS, the big Swede sheriff of Broken Bow, didn't rein up his horse until he was inside the circle of firelight, and he kept his hands well away from his carbine and sixshooter when he dismounted. He stood by the horse a moment looking at the three men around the fire while they returned his scrutiny.

They were three bad ones all right, each dangerous in his own separate way. Anders left his horse ground-hitched and moved toward the fire, the frozen grass crunching beneath his boots. He probably couldn't have slipped up on that little crowd unseen if he had wanted to.

Bret Storm leaned back against a boulder. He was a big, gray-faced man with a cynical droop to the corners of his mouth and pale blue eyes that never missed a movement near him. Storm was a killer, cold-blooded, killing when there was profit in it.

A breed the Broken Bow country knew as Banner squatted on his haunches next to Storm. He had been holding a skillet of bacon over the fire until Hunk rode up. He set the skillet down carefully and let his hands drop back to his sides without moving the rest of his body.

Jack Gallun was across the fire from Storm and Banner. He was the

youngest of the crowd, not much more than a kid, with yellowish hair sticking through his hat and a thin, wolfish look on his face. Hunk Anders knew the Gallun breed. They were bad, all right; it was bred into them; but they were loyal to their friends, too.

The sheriff nodded to the three men and held his big, freckled hands out to the heat of the fire. A November wind whistled through the foothills around them. "Evenin', gents." Hunk said. "Don't see any bank loot lyin' around."

"Didn't expect to, did you?" Storm laughed brittlely. "We didn't crack that bank down in town. It was three other guys. We're just out chasin' 'em same as you are."

Anders took off his hat and ran a hand through his graying hair. Then he reached for the makings and built a smoke, all very deliberately. "You was identified," he admitted. "Several people recognized you."

"And ain't that tough?" Storm laughed again. Banner the breed, shifted his body a little with the quick, catlike way he had of moving so that the butt of the gun on his right hip was within reach.

Hunk waited until he had lighted his smoke from a twig out of the fire, adjusted the coffee pot so that it wouldn't boil over, and leaned back comfortably.

"There's them that'd loot a bank because they wanted the money," he said slowly; "and there's them that'd do it for hellishness; and there's another kind of fellow that'd maybe hold up a bank and commit murder, too, in order to settle a grudge."

"Well?" Storm demanded.

Hunk blew smoke out of his wide nostrils. He knew what he meant, all right, that all three kinds were there around the fire. Storm was money crazy, like Sam Hailey who owned the bank, and like Alec Polger who had been killed in the robbery. The breed had just gone along because hellishness was part of his nature. Jack Gallun had a grudge against Hailey and Polger.

That was the way it was, even though the Swede couldn't figure out how to go about saying it or what good saying it would do.

He looked down at his cigarette, then up at Gallun. "You shot Polger, didn't you, Jack?"

"You're damn right I did," Jack snapped. "And I'll get Hailey. Hunk, you figure on takin' us all in and hangin' us. Well, I'll get Hailey if I have to come back from hell to do it.

"Sam Hailey killed my brother. Hell, I know he said Tom was rustlin' and maybe he was, but Hailey drove him to it. He killed Pa and he killed my mother, too, even if they did both die natural after they lost the place over on Divide. I'm goin' to get Hailey, Hunk."

"Shut up." Storm's voice cracked like a whip.

Anders wiped his red face on his red bandanna. "Jack, the law says I got to stop you from gettin' Hailey."

He pulled back the coffee pot and set it on a rock. Trouble was going to come and come fast, and there was no need of spilling the coffee when it came. Whatever men were left might need that coffee pretty badly. He took another long drag of his cigarette and flipped it into the fire.

"I guess I got to take all three of you in," he said as casually as though he were talking to the circuit rider at the town prayer meeting.

Hunk stood up. So did the other three. He had been careful to stay on the same side of the fire as Jack Gallun, and he noticed Gallun stepped a little behind him.

Maybe Jack would shoot him from behind, maybe not. The Galluns were bad. They were cattle thieves and horse thieves, and Jack was a killer, but they didn't turn against their friends.

Funny thing, Hunk reflected in that instant while they all stood there around the fire with the coffee pot

looking on from the rock where he had set it, the Galluns didn't seem made like most men in some respects. They weren't afraid of dying. Jack meant what he said when he said he'd come back from hell if necessary to get Sam Hailey. They were a hard breed, hard as they ever came, and if they started a job they finished it.

"Sheriff, you're either a damn poor bluffer or a damn fool," Storm's lips twitched in a sneer. "Shuck off that gun."

Anders stared straight into Storm's pale eyes and Storm returned the stare. Behind him, Hunk could hear Jack Gallun breathing heavily. Banner began to ease back, an inch at a time, and let his hand move toward his gun grip.

"I'm takin' you in, Bret, either ridin' in your saddle or tied across it," Hunk spoke carefully.

Storm yawned and stretched his long, bony arms. His arms were chest-high before they slapped down again and his hands hit the butts of his guns, spinning them out of the holsters and jabbing them up all in the same perfectly timed gesture.

"You asked for it," he snapped.

Hunk saw the breed's gun coming out, too, a trifle slower than Storm's. He grabbed at his own gun and lunged to one side, ducking and crouching in toward the fire.

Orange flame lanced out of the gun muzzle in Storm's right hand, and the bullet took a neat little slice out of the Swede's hat. Storm's next shot went into the fire, and Bret Storm was reeling back.

THE SWEDE'S gun was talking, but talking at the half breed who seemed to get his body all tangled up and go plunging down. Behind him, Hunk could hear firing methodically, not wasting any powder and planting each bullet where it would count. Necessity and living in the rimrock had taught the Galluns saving ways.

Gallun's voice came in a gasp. "I figured the play different, sheriff."

Hunk turned on Jack and let the gun drop into his holster. "Put up that iron," he ordered. "I'm takin' you in."

Gallun's face looked thinner and more wolfish than ever while he crouched there just inside the firelight, his gun leveled on the big sheriff's chest.

"Don't try it, Hunk," he said almost pleadingly. "For God sake don't try it."

"I'm takin' you in," Hunk repeated.

He moved toward Jack slowly, his hands empty, staring straight into the muzzle of the gun. It was a gamble then. With a gun he wouldn't stand a chance with Jack Gallun, but without a gun—well, that was a gamble.

It wouldn't be fear of dying that would make Jack shoot. The Galluns weren't like most men in that respect. It would simply be so that he could stay alive to settle his score with Sam Hailey.

"Hunk," Jack pleaded. "You don't sabe. I got to get Hailey. Us Galluns was just made so we can't turn back. I'll take what's comin' to me. I ain't scared of that, but dammit, Hunk—"

Anders didn't answer. He stepped close to Jack, reached out one big hand and seized the gun. He tilted it up, then jerked it out of Gallun's hand. Jack's face was white and his lips twitching a little.

"Why in hell did I let you do that, Hunk?" he whispered.

" 'Spect it's 'cause you're a Gallun," Hunk told him. " 'Spect it's because I saw that your mother got her grocery bill paid after your Pa died, when she didn't have any money. Yeh, there ain't a thing you Galluns wouldn't do for a man you liked and there ain't a thing you wouldn't do to one you hated."

Jack laughed thinly, reached for the coffee pot and a tin cup and gulped down a cupful of scalding coffee. "If I go in with you—?" He ran one finger around his throat. "That right?"

"Afraid so," Hunk Anders admitted.

"I'll see you get a square trial, Jack, but a jury'll say it's murder. We better get started. The coroner can pick up them other two in the morning."

Anders untied his sheepskin coat from behind his saddle and pulled it on before he swung onto his horse. He rubbed his big hands together to get some circulation into them again and watched Jack mount.

He didn't handcuff or tie his prisoner, and he didn't even bother to keep a gun on Jack. He knew the Galluns pretty well. There was a lot of twisted pride in that outlaw family, and there was no use making things harder on Jack by insulting him with handcuffs.

"Hunk," Gallun seemed to be talking as much to himself as to the sheriff as they jogged across the brown Montana hills. "Hunk, if I don't get Hailey he'll go on just like he's doin'. There'll be other folks he'll put on the back trail. Can't you see that, Hunk?"

"Us Galluns wasn't no worse than most folks. Maybe Pa had run a crooked brand or two, but most folks has. When me and Tom was born, Pa figured us both for preachers. It was Hailey made him turn bad when he crowded Pa off Divide Creek. Seein' what me and Tom would turn into killed the old folks. And there'll be others go just the same way."

"Can't do it, Jack," Anders looked up from making himself a smoke, sheltering his hands beneath his sheepskin to keep the wind from blowing the tobacco out of the paper. "I got a job to do, too, one I promised other folks to see got done."

Jack turned in his saddle. His mouth had stopped twitching, and there was a cold, brilliant light in his gray eyes, like fire flickering behind ice.

"I'll kill Sam Hailey if I have to come back from hell to do it."

Anders had to strike three matches to get his smoke going. If any other man had said that, it would have been simply an empty threat or a boast, but the Gallun men didn't boast. If they made a threat, it was a promise, and they kept their word.

Off across the flats, the lights of Broken Bow twinkled yellowly through the darkness. Jack reined up his horse when they came in sight of the first lights. He gulped a couple of times but that was the only sign he gave that he knew what returning to town meant for him.

He turned in his saddle and looked off toward the west where a long bare spine marked Divide Creek.

"See that hump up on Divide." He pointed for Anders to look. "That's where the old folks is buried, and Tom's pretty close to there. Hailey put 'em all there. Reckon this is about the last time I'll ever see that there old hump. Just wanted to be sure and remember it."

Hunk nodded and brought a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. "Reckon I'd better put 'em on here, Jack. It'd maybe cost me my job if we was to go down with you ridin' open." Gallun held out his hands and grinned. They understood each other.

HUNK ANDERS noticed there was quite a little crowd, a dozen or so men, around the sheriff's office and jail when he rode into town with his prisoner. He didn't like that, but Ben Peck, his deputy, was there and seemed to have everything pretty well in hand.

There was a low murmur from the crowd when Hunk crowded Jack Gallun's horse in to the hitching rack and they both dismounted. Hunk let his eyes sweep over the men. Sam Hailey was there, standing a little apart from the others, and most of the others were men from Hailey's ranches. He didn't like the looks of it, but there didn't seem much he could do about it. In Montana, men had a perfect right to stand where they pleased.

The crowd split to let him and Jack through. Hunk had reached the door of the office before Hailey's voice

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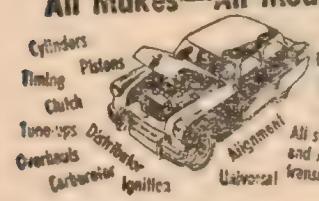

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stopped him. "Where's the other two that was in on this?"

Hunk thought a minute. "They didn't feel like comin' in."

"You've been friendly with Jack Gallun, there, Sheriff, and I want to tell you there's going to be no favoritism showed to him on account of that."

Hunk looked Hailey over, couldn't think of anything that was worth saying and pushed the door open. Hailey was talking for the benefit of the crowd, and so long as it didn't go any farther than talk, Hunk was satisfied. Hailey followed him into the office. Anders didn't like that either.

There was pure hatred in Hailey's voice when he stepped close to Jack and snarled, "Gallun, I put your brother where he won't do any more harm, and I'm going to put you there, too."

"Let him alone," Hunk ordered.

Hailey's face started to turn dark, as it always did when he was crossed. "Are you trying to tell me what to do, Sheriff?"

"Might be." Anders pushed Jack toward a little room at the rear of the building where the windows were barred and there was a padlock on the door. It wasn't much of a jail, having been the commissary when Broken Bow was an army post; but it served.

Hailey was waiting, sitting on Hunk's desk when the sheriff returned. "There's another thing, too, Anders," Hailey snapped. "I want the money those three got away with. You understand that."

Hunk nodded. "Pull yourself up a chair. Sam. I want to do a little talkin' myself."

Anders pulled off his sheepskin, hung it on a nail, added his vest, and very carefully built a smoke. "Sam." he said, "Jack and them other two killed Polger and cracked the bank, but you was the man that planned it."

"Do you mean—" Hailey roared.

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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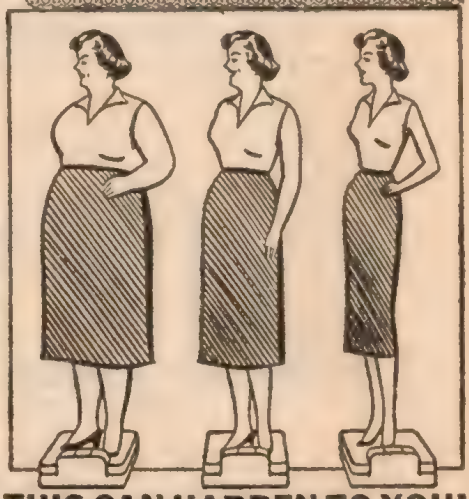

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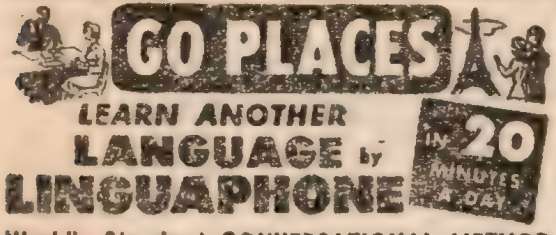

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"Huh-uh, not that way, Sam. The law can't touch you. You and Polger had quite a spread built up, and if one of you died, the other'n would get it. You knew Jack would kill either of you if he got a chance, so you sort of gave him the chance, to get Alec. Sam, there ain't a thing, not a damn thing, you wouldn't do for money."

Hailey's face was brick red with anger. "Anders," he snapped, "I'm getting damn well fed up with you as sheriff. You forget that kind of talk and get that money back or Ben Pack is going to be wearing your star."

Hailey slammed the office door when he went out. Hunk looked after him a moment speculatively and shook his head. He got up heavily and went back to the padlocked cell. There wasn't any way the law could touch Sam Hailey.

"Guess you heard what went on out there." he said awkwardly to Jack Gallun. "Want to say where you cached that money? I dunno. Maybe if we got that back, I could see you just got sent up to Deer Lodge."

Jack laughed harshly, "I ain't scared of hangin' if that's what you mean, Hunk. If I went to Deer Lodge, I wouldn't never get back to finish things up here."

Anders locked the door again, pocketed the key, and wandered down to the railroad house for a belated supper. He noticed quite a few people on the street didn't speak to him and that Sam Hailey had more of his own men in town than usual.

WHEN THE waitress brought him his meal, he stopped her by spinning a silver dollar on the counter. "What's the talk in town?" he asked.

She considered a moment before she picked up the dollar. "Hailey says you intend to turn Gallun loose and let the money go. Folks that lost money in that holdup are pretty upset."

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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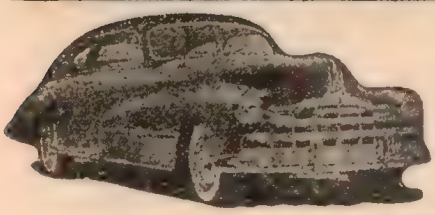

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Compression Readings—1948 Pontiac

	Cyl. 1	Cyl. 2	Cyl. 3	Cyl. 4	Cyl. 5	Cyl. 6	Cyl. 7	Cyl. 8
Before	105 lbs	95 lbs	107 lbs	120 lbs	110 lbs	115 lbs	95 lbs	123 lbs
After	125 lbs	120 lbs	120 lbs	125 lbs	122 lbs	120 lbs	115 lbs	116 lbs

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

"Don't blame 'em." Hunk Anders felt awkward gossiping with a pretty girl. "Sometime Hailey's goin' to open that mouth of his'n so far he'll fall plumb into it."

Hunk was worried when he left the eating house. He didn't like the way men kept watching him and stopped talking when he approached. He liked it still less when he saw Ben Pack drinking with Hailey in the *Free Silver* bar.

He bought a pint of good whiskey and took it back to the jail to Gallun. Jack knocked the neck off the bottle, gulped down half a pint of whiskey and strode to the window where he could look out onto the street. His eyes were pale and flickering when he turned back to Hunk.

"You played square with me. I'll play square with you. Remember that trail that goes up Shoshone Butte right alongside the old freight road, the one you can see the whole road from? Well, if you was to follow that till you hit a little cave back in the rock you might find the bank money there."

Anders looked out of the window. He could see men milling around on the sidewalks from there, and he knew that Jack must know what they meant. He wondered if Gallun was deliberately trying to keep him out of trouble with Hailey. Hunk Anders had never been very good at figuring puzzles, and that one had him stumped.

He might send Pack out to look in the cave, but that would only make Hailey's men more dangerous because it would look as though he were trying to get Pack out of town so he could have a free hand.

He decided the deputy had better stay. Ben Pack was a good enough man, maybe not quite as steady as he might be, but honest enough. If a mob tried to take over the jail, Pack would prevent it if any man could.

Hunk pulled on his coat and went down to the livery stable after his

horse. He wished that old trail up Shoshone Butte wasn't so far from town.

He was beginning to feel old and disgusted with himself. Times like that, when the law said one thing and a man's own nature said another, were hard to handle. Still, he had sworn to uphold the law, and as he looked at matters in his not very articulate way, there wasn't anything else he could do but what he was doing.

Jack Gallun paced his cell like a trapped coyote walking only as far as the trap chain would let him. He looked out of the window, took another gulp of whiskey and returned to his bunk.

He fished around in his pockets until he found a spare .45 cartridge and a piece of paper. Using the lead of the cartridge, he scribbled a note and wrapped it around the cartridge. Then he waited, holding the note and cartridge in one hand and the whiskey bottle in the other.

He laughed softly to himself and smashed his fist against the window. The wind blowing in through the shattered window was cold, but despite that there as sweat on Jack Gallun's thin, gray tinged face. "Damn you, Hailey," he kept muttering to himself. "Damn you."

The sheriff had been gone for an hour when Jack heard bootsteps in the office outside the cell. He heard Ben Pack say uncertainly. "Listen, Sam, the sheriff is goin' to raise hell if he finds out I let you in here."

"If Anders can't find out where that money is, I can," Hailey shouted. "And by God, I'm going to."

Jack glanced through the open window and shivered a little. He tossed the cartridge with the note wrapped around it in the center of the floor and sprawled out on the bunk, the whiskey bottle almost empty beside him on the floor. The key grated in the padlock.

[*Turn Page*]

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Hailey strode into the room, walking very stiffly erect. "Where did that liquor come from?" he demanded and kicked the bottle over. He was reaching for Jack Gallun's shoulder when Pack stopped him.

"There's something that looks maybe like a note on the floor there, Sam."

HAILEY picked up the note and strode over to the window where there was light enough to read it. He swore angrily under his breath. Then a shrewd, cold light came into his eyes.

"The stuff's cached under a heap of rocks out on the old freight road," the note read. It was signed "Bret Storm." Hailey's blunt fingers trembled while he stared from the note to Ben Pack the deputy.

There was six thousand dollars out on the freight road for a man to pick up. Six thousand dollars was a lot of money, and if it never returned to the bank there was a legitimate excuse for its not returning.

"What's it say?" Pack demanded.

Hailey's mouth tightened. "Anders was lying when he said he got those other two. This is from Storm. He says they'll get out of here tonight. Heaven only knows how many men they've got. Damn lucky Gallun was too drunk to see this."

Pack fidgeted uneasily. "If they've got men enough, it's goin't to be darned hard to hold this place."

"We won't have to hold it." Hailey crumpled the note in his hand and shoved it into his pocket. "I'm going to talk to some of my boys. Gallun won't be around then, and if Hunk Anders says anything, you just remember this note. I'm getting damn sick of Anders, anyhow."

As soon as the door closed, Jack Gallun stood up. His hands were trembling when he built a smoke, but he was grinning in that tight-lipped, wolfish way he had. He gulped smoke into

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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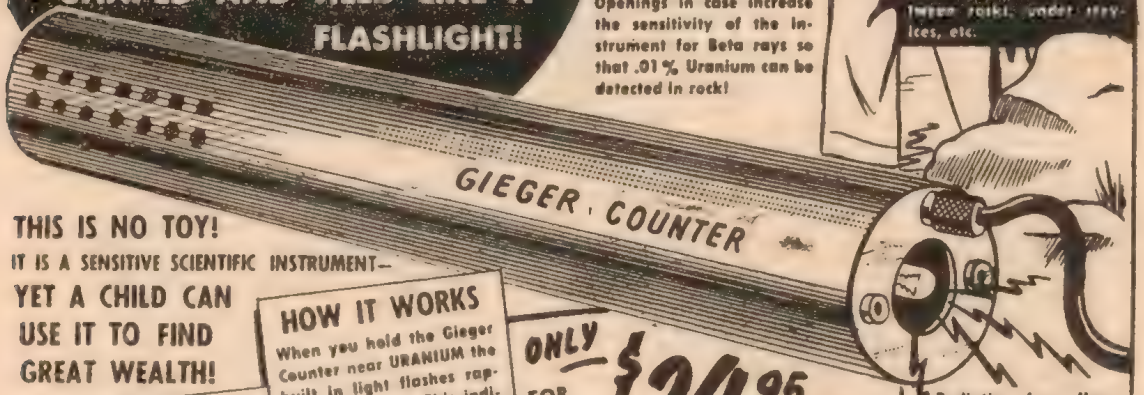

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his lungs and listened to the angry shouts coming from outside.

He had finished with the smoke when he heard the door of the sheriff's office fling open and men crowding inside. He flipped away the cigarette butt, took another long look out at the white sage flats with the moon sailing over them, and waited.

Dawn was breaking across the gray lava hummocks when Hunk Anders came in sight of Broken Bow sprawled out on the flats. He was tired and disgusted with himself and puzzled.

There had been no bank loot cached up on the old cattle trail, nor had there been any sign a horse had been ridden up that trail for weeks. He couldn't quite figure why Jack Gallun would want to send him on a wild goose chase.

The town was quiet when he rode in just as the sun was coming up through the purple dust haze. Hunk nodded agreeably and let his big body slump down in the saddle. There was no danger of a lynch mob as quiet as the town was. Mobs didn't spring from nowhere. They had to be built up.

He reined up in front of his office and dismounted. Ben Pack stood in the doorway watching him. Hunk nodded to the deputy and let a grin slide over his big, rugged face.

"You fed the prisoner yet, Ben?"

Pack shifted uncertainly in the doorway, reached for tobacco and changed his mind. He stood there staring down at his hands.

"Gallun's gone. Some of the boys—well, they lynched him last night."

Hunk didn't say anything. He just stood there looking at his deputy and fumbling at the buttons on his coat. Pack's voice was shaky when he went on to tell Hunk about the note.

"Storm's dead." Hunk Anders' eyes got bleak and wintry looking. "I want to see that note. Hailey still got it?"

Pack nodded. "I dunno where he went, but he rode in just ahead of you.

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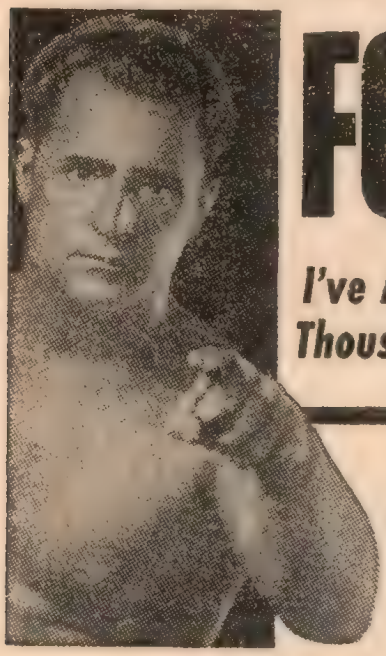

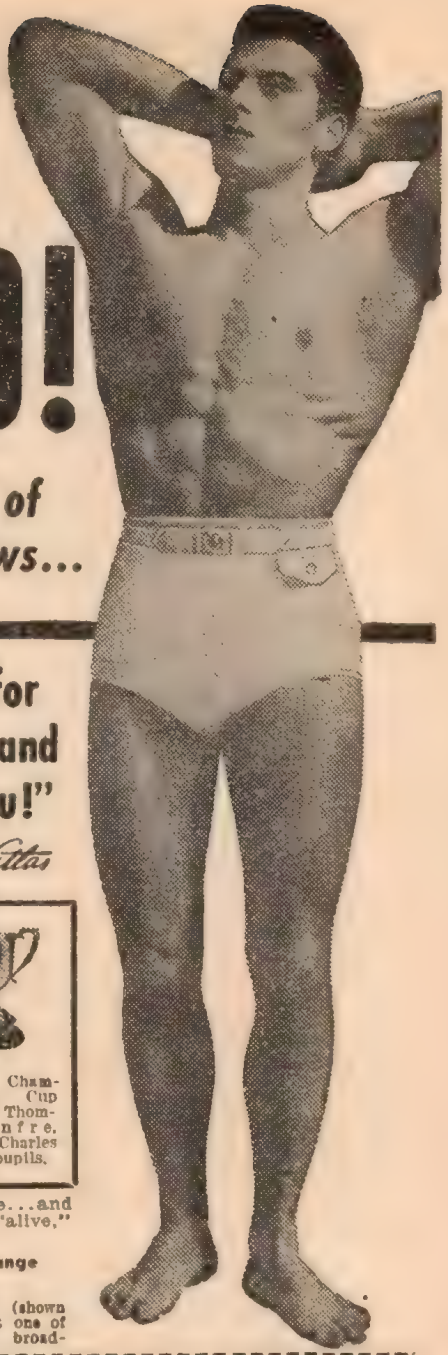

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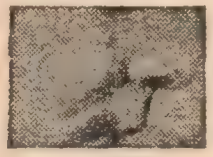

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Hunk thought a minute. "No," he decided. He shook his gun loose in his holster before he started down the street to the livery stable. What was coming was strictly between him and Sam Hailey and Jack.

Hailey was coming out of the livery stable carrying two saddlebags when Hunk stopped him. Hailey set the saddle bags down and stepped in front of them. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Anders looked into Hailey's glittering eyes, and he noticed, too, how the banker kept wetting his lips with his tongue. "I want to see what's in them paniers."

"You can go to hell, Anders."

Hunk considered a moment. He had never been particularly good at talking, and the more angry he got the harder it was for him to talk. He was getting angrier and colder inside every minute.

"You picked up a note last night," he fumbled at his words a little. "And you caused a man to be lynched. If that note said what you say it did, you had good enough reasons. Only I know it didn't, because Bret Storm was dead then."

"Well?"

"Hailey, causing a man to be lynched is murder, and if that note didn't say there was goin' to be a jail delivery, I'll see you hang just as sure as heaven."

SAM HAILEY'S voice was thin, with a dangerous knife edge on it. "I threw the note away. What's these saddle bags got to do with it?"

"I seen you out on the old freight road last night," Hunk kept moving toward Hailey and the bags. "I think maybe the loot from the bank is in them paniers. I figured you were in on

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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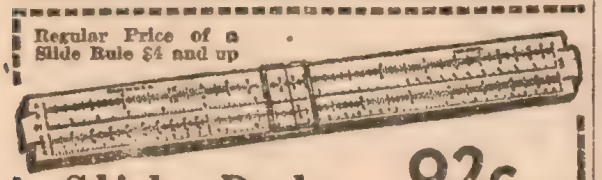

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this, Sam, one way or another, and if you were in so deep you knew where that loot was—well, that's bank robbery and murder. I'm goin' to look in them bags."

Hunk Anders reached for one of the saddle bags. Talking was a pretty hard thing for him to do, and he was glad he had that end of it over with. Hailey either had the money or he hadn't. If he hadn't well and good. If he had—That would suit Hunk all right, too.

Sam Hailey was thinking fast while he watched Anders fumble at the straps on the saddle bag. The note he had picked up was in his pocket, and it would clear him of the bank robbery,

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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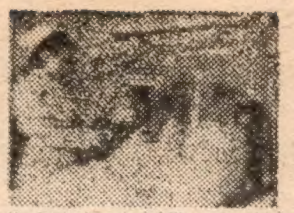
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but if he showed it, he knew the big, slow-moving sheriff would use that note just as he said he would. But if he didn't show it, the money in the two saddle bags would convict him of bringing about the robbery of his own bank and the murder of his partner.

He knew how Montana juries would look upon that.

The sheriff's back was turned, and he was stooping down. Hunk Anders had always been too trusting for his own good, Hailey reflected coldly. There was no one in sight. If something were to happen to Anders, people might suspect him, Sam Hailey. But with a man of his importance, suspicion wasn't proof by a long way.

He slowly eased the gun out of his shoulder holster and brought it up level with the back of the sheriff's head. His thumb began to ease back the hammer.

Hunk Anders straightened with an awkward jerk. There was the crack of a gun. Anders looked a little surprised at the smoke spiraling from his own gun muzzle and at Sam Hailey tottering in front of him.

"Guess it's a good thing I figured you that way, Sam," he said thoughtfully, "and was waitin' for the click of the gun hammer."

Ben Pack cornered Hunk in the sheriff's office and buttonholed him. "Now listen, Hunk," he demanded. "There was only three of 'em in the holdup, and if Hailey was in on it, Jack Gallun wasn't. Jack Gallun was innocent, is that it?"

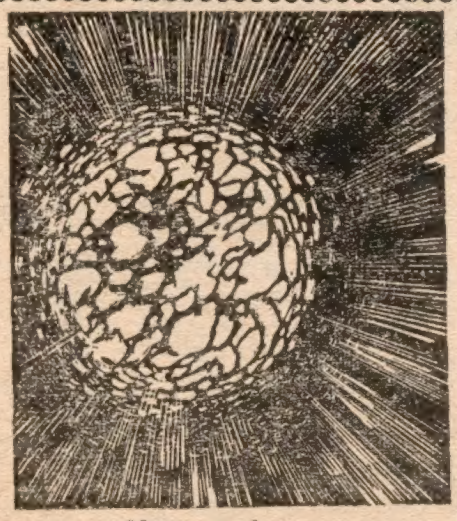
"Maybe," Hunk admitted, "dependin' on how broadminded you are and how well you know a man and his reasons."

Pack shook his head. "I don't sabe at all, but anyhow, the boys want to put up a monument to Jack and they figure that since you know him better'n anybody else you'd maybe know what to put on it."

Anders built a smoke very deliberately. He knew what should go on the monument all right. Something about how the Galluns weren't like most men because they weren't afraid of dying if they could get a job done that way. And how there wasn't a thing they wouldn't do for a man they liked or to a man they hated. He wasn't much of a hand at stringing words together, though.

"Shucks, just say most anything nice," he growled. "I reckon Jack would understand. I reckon he's satisfied."

★



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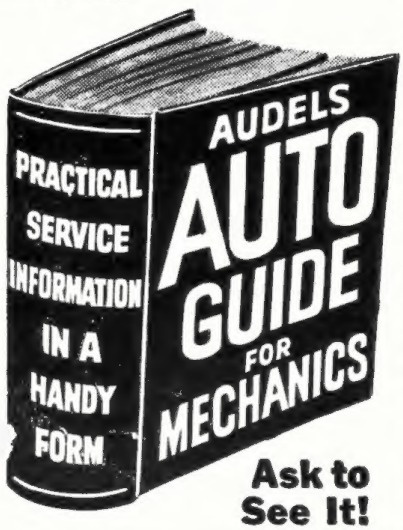

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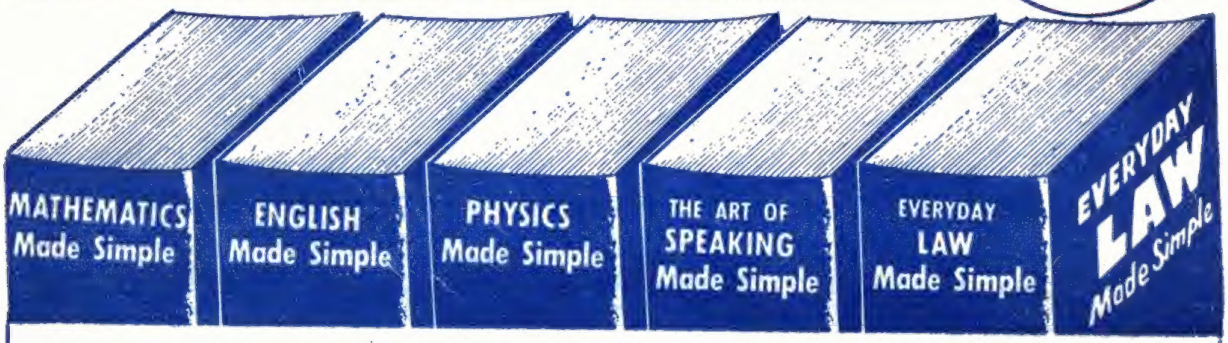

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